

come on and let me know (should i stay or should i go?) by QueenWithABeeThrone

Series: something strange in the neighborhood (of hell's kitchen) || stranger things + defenders au [1]

Category: Daredevil (TV), Stranger Things (TV 2016), The Defenders (Marvel TV)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Crossover, Case Fic, Crack Treated Seriously, Ensemble Cast, Gen, Getting the Band Back Together, Grief/Mourning, Identity Reveal, Kidnapping, Missing Persons, Monster Pets, Multi, Mystery, Not The Punisher Compliant, Post-The Defenders, Reunion, Weekly Updates, canonical fake character death, hopefully, monster fighting, psychic powers, st happens in the late eighties/early nineties, what the fuck is a timeline, why is nyc like this

Language: English

Characters: Brett Mahoney, Claire Temple, Colleen Wing, Danny Rand, Eleven (Stranger Things), Franklin "Foggy" Nelson, Jessica Jones, Jonathan Byers, Karen Page, Lucas Sinclair, Luke Cage, Malcolm Ducasse, Marci Stahl, Matt Murdock, Max Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Trish Walker, Will Byers, Wilson Fisk

Relationships: Claire Temple & Colleen Wing, Colleen Wing/Danny Rand, Dustin Henderson & Steve Harrington, Lucas Sinclair/Max, Luke Cage & Danny Rand, Luke Cage/Claire Temple, Matt Murdock & "Foggy" Nelson & Karen Page, Matt Murdock/Franklin "Foggy" Nelson, Mike Wheeler/Eleven, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler/Jonathan Byers, The Party - Relationship

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Summary:

“So—what can the law firm of Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz do for you, Mike?” he asks.

Mike rolls his eyes. “I’m not here to ask the law firm of Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz, Dustin,” he says. “I’m here to talk to you. Individually. As a friend.”

“You could’ve just called,” says Foggy. “I have a personal phone. Plus I have like, five meetings later—”

“This isn’t something I could just call you with,” says Mike, and his own cheery facade slips at last. “Dustin—Nancy’s missing.”

or: someone's trying to open a new gate in New York. at the same time, Nancy Wheeler, now a reporter for the Times, her husband Jonathan and their boyfriend Steve go missing. the former Party suspects these two events are linked. meanwhile, the Defenders are trying to figure out what the hell is going on in New York again, while Matt Murdock throws himself into crime-fighting once more, stumbling on something else entirely.

Foggy Nelson, also known as Dustin Henderson-Nelson (*thanks mom*), is just trying to put his life back together in the wake of Midland Circle. this is not what he had in mind.

1. we can't look back for nothing

Author's Note:

title is from the Clash's "Should I Stay Or Should I Go".

it's the time of year when I get around to thinking "hey maybe this fucking insane crackfic might work," and finals has eroded my self-control enough for me to write and post it.

Summary for the Chapter:

"The hell are those," says Matt.

"Bad news, that's what," says Foggy. "Matt, can you hear anything?"

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter title is from Tamer's "Beautiful Crime".

set the scene.

"Run! Run—"

"I'm running as fast as I can, Foggy!"

"Run faster!" Foggy grabs hold of Karen's arm, all but yanks her left, away from the ravening pack of demodogs and Shelob-lings trying to find them. "Come on, come on—"

"The hell are those," says Matt.

"Bad news, that's what," says Foggy. "Matt, can you hear anything?"

Matt shakes his head, says, "That last scream that *thing* did—my senses are off, I can't tell." His ungloved hand squeezes Foggy's arm a little tighter, and Foggy can feel the cold clammy sweat on his skin even through the shirt. "What was that? How did you know what

those things were?”

“What is going on here?” says Karen.

“It’s a long story,” says Foggy, “and we don’t really have the time to discuss this right now because *did you guys hear that.*” He cranes his neck a little, to hear the sound better—the cry of an adolescent demogorgon, hungry for flesh. For blood.

Matt tenses.

Foggy makes a decision, and pushes him back behind him. “I know how to deal with these things,” he says.

“All right, how?” says Karen. “I *have* to know.”

Foggy picks up a crowbar, lying conveniently around, and tries not to think about the millions of diseases he’s likely to get off this random piece of junk alone. Anyway, he’s already a little disgusting, there’s demodog blood on his shirt where he bashed one of them with a baseball bat.

“I need you guys to get out of here,” he says. “I can hold them off for a while,” like poor dead Bob Newby, “but you guys need to get moving the moment Karen can see them.”

“We aren’t leaving you here,” Karen snaps. “Right, Matt?”

Foggy looks at Matt, who has left him before, and says, “You have to get her out of here when you go. You *have to*, and please, Matt—don’t try to save me.”

Matt cocks his head. “No,” he says. “I’m not going to leave you.”

“You did it before!” Foggy snaps.

“And that was a mistake,” says Matt. “You’re—shit, Foggy, you can’t ask me not to save you. That’s not how this works.”

“Then enlighten me on how this works,” says Foggy, gesturing wildly with one hand holding a crowbar, “because I have *no goddamn idea* anymore.”

The demodogs' snarls rip through the air, then. Foggy swears, steps forward and twirls the crowbar in his hand as he crouches. He never thought his past would catch up to him, not like this, not before a week ago.

He sucks in a breath as the first demodog appears around the corner

"*Back off,*" comes the yell, and just in time too, because the demodog leaps at him and Foggy's gotten his crowbar up just a heartbeat too late. It freezes in mid-air, hovers right there, before an invisible force slams it hard enough into a nearby wall to snap bones.

Foggy whips around. So does Karen, who grabs Matt by his arm and turns him around too.

"Dustin!" says Jane Wheeler, rocking a leather jacket like she was born to wear one. Beside her is Mike, with a shotgun in his hands. "We were *so worried*—"

"Dustin?" says Karen.

"I started going by my middle name in college," Foggy explains. "But enough about that, were you guys following us?"

"Not to the new gate," says Mike, lowering the shotgun. "El found you, and we sussed out where you were. By the way, did you see Nancy? Or Jonathan, or Steve?"

"They weren't there," says Foggy.

"What does *Nancy Wheeler* have to do with those *things*?" says Karen, incredulous.

"The missing reporter from the *Times*?" says Matt. "And, also, Foggy—who *are* these two, anyway?"

"Questions later," says Foggy, urging Matt and Karen forward after Mike and Jane, "running *now*." He shoots a glance back over his shoulder, spotting three more demodogs sniffing around the corner, and says, "I'll explain everything, I swear—"

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where it starts.

It's—difficult, to figure out just where it started.

Maybe it started when Foggy was twelve, and Will Byers disappeared into the Upside Down for a week.

Maybe it started when he was thirteen, and he found a little creature in the trash, fed it and kept it safe until he walked in on it eating his cat.

Whatever it is, Foggy's always just been—aware, in the back of his mind, that it'd catch up to him one day, no matter where he went. New York was pretty damn far from Hawkins, the farthest you could get, and after a while the PTSD (that's what it is, isn't it, when you keep seeing sharp rows of sharp teeth and monsters trying to break through the walls) starts to let up on him.

Matt's—Matt *had* never known. For one thing, Foggy had signed like fifty million NDAs, and even twenty years couldn't change that. For another, Foggy hadn't wanted to expose him to that world, the world he'd been a part of until he was seventeen.

He talks to the others, sometimes. Keeps in touch, because that's what friends do.

Friends don't lie, Jane's voice rings in his head, Jane when they used to call her Eleven. Dustin had believed that, when he was younger.

Foggy's not as certain anymore. He hasn't been since Midland Circle. Maybe since he found Matt, bleeding out on his apartment floor.

But anyway—it comes back, one day, as these things always do.

He walks into his office and stops in his tracks.

"Holy shit," he says. "*Mike?*"

Michael Wheeler stands up from the chair usually reserved for his clients, eyes brightening when he sees him. "Dustin!" he says, and it

knocks Foggy off his feet. He hasn't heard his first name in years. "Damn, look at you! A big-time lawyer now!"

He pulls Foggy into a hug.

Foggy—hasn't had that in a while either. He goes rigid, then shuts his eyes and hugs back, a little tighter than he would have years ago. He holds on longer than he would have years ago, too, and is almost reluctant to break away.

"And look at you," says Foggy, with a grin, "all—sunburned and vacationed out, apparently, wow. Lucas said you and Jane were in the Philippines for her book tour."

"Yeah, we were, it was a nice place," says Mike, wincing as he steps away. "Sunburn aside. How's Brett?"

"He's a cop," says Foggy. "I'm a lawyer."

"Like you guys weren't at each other's throats from when you were kids," Mike says, as Foggy motions for him to sit down and takes a seat himself. For any other client he'd put a desk between them, but Mike was a party member, so Foggy sits in the uncomfortable chair across from him. "Nice office you got here," says Mike. "Though—what happened to your last one?"

Foggy swallows. "Got gobbled up by a financial firm," he says. It's even true.

Mike shoots him a look, the one that says *you are so lucky Jane isn't here*. Foggy just gives him a bland smile in return. "Sure, it did," he says, and when did Mike stop being so incredibly oblivious? "You doing okay?"

No, he's not. Matt's death has left him reeling, yanked the rug out from under him even six months on.

"I'm okay," says Foggy. He's had practice at lying to friends now. "So—what can the law firm of Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz do for you, Mike?" he asks.

Mike rolls his eyes. "I'm not here to ask the law firm of Hogarth,

Chao and Benowitz, Dustin,” he says. “I’m here to talk to you. Individually. As a friend.”

“You could’ve just called,” says Foggy, a little annoyed that Mike went to his office for a *social call*. “I have a personal phone. Plus I have like, five meetings later—”

“This isn’t something I could just call you with,” says Mike, and his own cheery facade slips at last, the anxiety underneath shining through. “Dustin—Nancy’s missing.”

It’s a punch to the gut. *Nancy’s missing*. “Have you tried Steve’s?” he hears himself say, from somewhere far away. “Or the Hopper-Byers place back in Hawkins. I’m not exactly her first port of call, these days.”

“That’s the problem,” says Mike. “You know who else is missing? Steve and Jonathan. Will and Jane are worried out of their minds.”

If Nancy disappearing was a punch to the gut, Steve’s sudden disappearance is the knife that’s left behind, and Jonathan the cruel twist. The three of them are a unit—he knows, with an awful clarity, that if Nancy went missing, Steve and Jonathan would’ve gone after her. Would’ve leaned on everyone they knew, to help them find her.

That neither of them talked to him, or to anyone else, means they went missing too close together to be able to start getting help.

He almost misses Mike’s next words: “And we think it’s got something to do with one of HCB’s clients—someone named Carolyn Trainer. Nancy was investigating her when I last checked, compiling evidence so she could put the story out.”

“Client-attorney privilege,” says Foggy, but somewhere in his memory the kid he used to be says, *A party member needs our assistance, and it is our duty to render that assistance*. “I can’t just—hand over the files, Mike. I’d be fired, I’d be disbarred.”

“I’m not asking for files!” says Mike. “I’m not even asking for you to confirm what I’m saying! I just—I need a *lead*, Dustin, please, something to lead me to my sister—”

Foggy stands up, crosses the room to his file cabinet, and says, "I'm telling you, Mike, I *can't help*. Trainer's one of HCB's biggest clients, losing her would be a blow to the firm as a whole." He pulls out the file marked *Trainer Sciences and Tech*, and opens it up to a page on shady scientific experiments conducted in the confines of their lab. "I can't just give you the files," he continues, looking back at Mike and holding the file up for him to see.

The understanding dawns in Mike's eyes, and his old friend all but launches himself at Foggy to read over his shoulder.

"You're nosy," says Foggy, turning a page. He'd always had a bad feeling about Trainer anyway. "How is Jane, anyway?"

"She's fine," says Mike, eyes scanning over the details of Trainer's life. Foggy looks them over—father dead, in a lab accident in Indiana, mother missing, a lifetime of clawing her way up to a position where she could start her own company, dedicated to improving lives through science and technology. Shady deals in the dark, lawsuits settled out of court. Nothing wrong with settling, but something about the circumstances Trainer settled them in is *off*. "She says hi, by the way, and also you should call her more. She misses talking to you."

"You know I would," says Foggy, sincerely, "if I wasn't so busy all the time."

Mike looks at him, then at his caseload—a stack of files that he's slogging through, that will probably never be done at this rate. "You know you can talk to us, right?" he says. "Not just me and Jane. Lucas and Max, too. And definitely Steve, if he were here."

"I know," says Foggy, with a grin as he perches on the edge of his desk. "I'm okay. I swear I am."

Liar, liar.

2. remember when i knew a boxer

Summary for the Chapter:

"I think," Foggy says, at last, "that she might have a connection to an old friend's disappearance."

"Murdock?" says Marci.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from The Gaslight Anthem's "Boxer".

the night nurse.

Claire's on her way home from talking with Bobby Fish when she hears a shout. A very familiar shout.

"Claire!"

She stops in her tracks. She smiles, and turns around. "Lucas, hey," she says, as her college friend Lucas Sinclair jogs down the street. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, how long has it been?" says Lucas, coming to a stop. He grins a little at her, warm and kind, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Something's up, she thinks. "Seven years?"

"Eight," Claire corrects, then she blinks. "Shit, that long? I didn't realize."

"Time flies by pretty quick," says Lucas, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Want to get some coffee with me, for old times' sake?"

"Nope," says Claire, almost automatically, and it takes seeing Lucas' eyebrows go up in surprise for her to remember that not everyone she knows has a near-Pavlovian reaction to coffee. "Tea would be nice, though," she amends. "I've got a regular coffee date with somebody else already."

"Yeah, I heard," says Lucas. "Luke Cage?"

“Yep,” Claire confirms, as the two of them step inside the café. “And before you ask, no, I am *not* giving you or your wife any details, you gossip hen.”

“One time,” says Lucas, with a laugh, “*one time*.”

“Never again,” says Claire, as they order at the counter. She takes note of Lucas’ order—so he’s changed his tastes at last, going from black coffee to lattes. It’s just one tiny, surprising detail among many, she’s sure, it’s been a long time since she and her old med school roommate got to see each other outside of Facebook.

Only—

“What brings you all the way out to New York City?” she says, once they’ve sat down with their drinks and her snack, a croissant with a hot dog inside. “It’s a little farther from Hawkins than I thought you’d want to be.”

“My old babysitter Steve lives in Queens,” says Lucas, “with his SOs. And an old friend of mine lives in Hell’s Kitchen, used to play Dungeons and Dragons with me on the weekends.”

Claire’s heart twists just a little, at the mention of Hell’s Kitchen. For all the trauma she went through in that neighborhood, there’s no denying it and the man who protected it made a significant impact on her and her life, pushed her down a new road from the one she was on.

She hopes to god Foggy and Karen are doing okay.

“I notice neither of them live in Harlem,” she says. “Why’d you come up here?”

Lucas lets out a tired breath. “Because a few days ago,” he says, “Nancy Wheeler went missing.”

“The *Times* reporter?” says Claire, surprised.

“She’s Steve’s girlfriend,” Lucas explains, “and his boyfriend Jonathan is her husband, so I figured they’d go after her. But when my wife and I dropped by their place to help them out?” He snaps his fingers.

“They were gone.”

“So they went after her,” says Claire.

“No, I think it’s worse,” says Lucas. He looks around them for a minute as if scanning the area for threats, then scoots his chair closer and leans in. “Nancy was working a story when she disappeared,” he says, quietly. “Something about the old Kingpin being connected to Carolyn Trainer, and more besides.”

“Fisk,” says Claire, quietly. The name still sends a chill down her spine, even now that Fisk is behind bars. “So are they—”

“They’re okay,” Lucas says. Claire decides not to point out that he sounds more like he’s trying to reassure himself than her, who’s never known Nancy Wheeler outside of her articles in the *New York Times*. “Nancy’s a resourceful person, and a good shot. Jonathan once punched a guy unconscious in a bar fight because the guy called his brother—something, I’m not sure what, exactly. Steve has a baseball bat studded with nails and knows how to use it. They’re gonna be fine.”

Yep. Definitely trying to convince himself that they’re okay.

Claire reaches out her hand and takes his. It’s shaking, she realizes, and badly—he’s scared of losing his former babysitter and his former babysitter’s boyfriend and girlfriend, more than anything right now.

“You don’t have to convince me,” she says. “I know a few reporters myself. They can take care of themselves.”

“You’re right,” says Lucas, but he doesn’t sound quite so convinced.

“So what are you doing up in Harlem?” says Claire.

“Looking for them,” says Lucas. “The last we heard anything about Nancy, she was going to Harlem to follow up on a lead. I figured, maybe someone had seen her or Steve or Jonathan around.”

“What do they look like?” says Claire.

Lucas tugs his wallet out of his pocket, pulls out a picture to show

her: one woman and two men, in their late thirties to early forties, maybe, grinning at the camera. One man has the biggest hair she's ever seen, the other has the biggest eye bags and she's pretty sure she's seen him before, but they're all delighted. Big Hair's even got his arms around both Nancy and Eye Bags.

"This is Steve," says Lucas, pointing at Big Hair. "This is Jonathan," he says, pointing at Eye Bags.

"Jonathan Byers?" says Claire. "The photographer?"

"Yep," says Lucas. "He and Nancy work together a lot, but Nancy's a lot more well-known than he is. He might've been going after Fisk more than Nancy, she's pretty recognizable."

"Fisk's in jail," says Claire.

"And yet he's still cutting deals with people on the outside," says Lucas. "Trainer's the biggest one, though. Nancy said the two of them were working together on—on *something*, she didn't say what."

"Any theories?" says Claire.

Lucas glances around, as if looking for threats, then lets out a breath. "She thinks it's connected to Hawkins Lab," he says, lowering his voice.

"The one you said closed down twenty years back?" says Claire.

"That's the one," says Lucas. "They were—working on experimental toxins, tried to cover up someone's death after she was exposed to them. We think maybe Trainer's trying to resurrect the project, with Fisk's backing."

Claire leans back. "Damn," she says, quiet. There's something he's keeping back from her, she knows. She's seen that shifty-eyed look too many times by now. "That's—a lot."

"It's just a theory," Lucas says.

"But it's the angle Nancy was chasing?"

“Yeah. At least I think it is.” Lucas’ fingers drum on the edge of the table, as he looks down at his coffee, barely touched. “And then she disappeared. And then Steve and Jonathan, too. It’s suspicious, to say the least.”

“So what do you want me to do?” says Claire.

Lucas’ head jerks up to meet her eyes. “You want to help?” he says.

“Yes,” says Claire. “Luke and I can put some feelers out. They’re pretty distinctive, anyway, someone will remember them.” She takes the photo from his hand, mentally notes the hair, the eyes, the clothes. Nancy’s the likeliest to stick out in Harlem, her professional, almost-conservative appearance fitting in more with an office in the Upper East Side than the streets of Harlem.

“Thank you so much, Claire,” breathes Lucas, grabbing a napkin and writing his phone number down. “If you find anything, call this number, all right? No matter how weird it might seem.”

Can’t be that weird, she reasons. Three people, chasing after someone heavily connected to Fisk—she’s got a feeling she knows where that’s going to end up.

“I will,” she promises.

(A week later, she’ll look back on this moment and laugh, hollowly. Turns out it can get *much* weirder.)

--

foggy bear and the golden girl.

Foggy finds Marci enjoying a cool cup of water at the water cooler and says, “Hey, you’re on the Trainer team, right?”

Marci blinks at him. “Uh, yeah,” she says. “And hi to you too, Foggy-bear. I’m doing just fine, you?”

Foggy winces a little, at her sharp words. Midland Circle had done a number on him, dragged him into a pit of work in order to stop thinking about Matt buried under all that rubble, and it had taken

Marci breaking up with him for him to start dragging himself out.

He's still working on it.

"I'm okay," he says. "It's just—"

He stops. Mike's worried face swims up out of recent memory. *Nancy's missing*. And so are Steve and Jonathan.

"Stuff's been happening, lately," he says, vaguely. "And I have been a shitty friend, in general. A shitty boyfriend, in specific."

"You want something, and it's not us getting back together," says Marci, narrowing her eyes at him. It's the same face she makes when she smells bullshit from a witness. "Do me a favor and spit it out."

Foggy sighs. "The Trainer case."

"Just because I gave you the L&Z files, Foggy-bear—" Marci starts.

"It's not that!" says Foggy, holding his hands up to ward off the oncoming storm. "It's nothing like that, I swear. It's just that something came up involving her—"

"I think I'd know," Marci interrupts, "if that did happen, seeing as I'm on the team assigned to her company."

"Something unofficial," says Foggy. "And I don't—need any files, not right now. I just need the stuff you can share. What's she like, for example. Is there anything *off* about her?"

"I can't tell you that," says Marci, haughtily.

"I'm not asking for details," says Foggy, growing desperate. Steve's in danger, Steve is probably being experimented on or getting hurt or god knows *what* and Foggy has to start somewhere, somehow, and maybe from there he can find Steve. "I just need to know if there's anything about her that you thought was suspicious, because—"

He cuts himself off.

"There you go again," says Marci. "Asking me for something, and not

even bothering to tell me what's up with you. *Jesus*, Foggy-bear—"

"I wish I could," says Foggy.

"Bullshit," says Marci, cutting straight to the point as always. "Out with it. Why do you want to know about Trainer so much? She isn't even anywhere near your wheelhouse."

Foggy rocks back onto his heels. He's losing her, he knows this, and unless he tells her what she wants to hear, then he won't be able to get the info he needs. "I think," he says, at last, "that she might have a connection to an old friend's disappearance."

"Murdock?" says Marci, and if the Nancy-Steve-Jonathan vanishing act left him with a metaphorical knife in his gut, then Matt's name alone is an eight-wheeler truck knocking him out and running him over, even now.

"Yeah," he lies to her. He knows exactly where Matt is—buried under a few thousand tons of steel and concrete, the remains of Midland Circle Financial. Dead. "Yeah, I'm—still looking."

For the first time since the conversation started, Marci lets her guard down, lips pressing together. "You realize he's probably dead, right?" she says, not unkindly.

Matt's definitely dead. Who survives an explosion like that?

But Steve's not. Steve is just—missing, the way Will had been. "I know," he lies again, "but I just—I want closure. I just want to know what happened to him." He isn't talking about *Matt*, not anymore, but it fools Marci, who sighs and sets her cup on top of the cooler.

"Stop giving me that puppy-eyed look," she says. "You want to know about Trainer?"

"Just what she's like," says Foggy. "Just if you think there's anything off about her. I don't need the details of any case involving her or her company."

Marci folds her arms across her chest. "She's a very driven woman," she says. "I like her for that. It's just—"

She hesitates, then sighs. “There are some old rumors,” she starts, “mostly about how, exactly, does she test out her products, and the circumstances she settled some of her more publicized lawsuits in. Plus some *really* out there shit.”

“Like what?”

Marci shrugs. “Some of the more hardcore conspiracy theorists that keep popping up say that she’s *really* related to that old coot who used to run Hawkins Lab, what was his name—”

“Martin Brenner,” says Foggy, distantly. The old man who’d cradled Eleven in his arms, tried to tell her to come home. Even then Dustin had been deeply unnerved by him, by how casually he could lead government soldiers and agents armed with guns on a manhunt for a bunch of kids.

“Oh, right, I remember,” says Marci, snapping her fingers, “you were a Hawkins boy, weren’t you?”

“I was,” says Foggy, lightly. “Biggest scandal we had since an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie’s hair.”

“That is so adorable,” says Marci. “Anyway, they think she’s trying to carry on his work with, what did they call it, MK-ULTRA.” She spins her finger around her ear, with a little laugh. “Crazy shit, right?”

“Totally,” says Foggy. “It’s just so weird, right?”

“You’d think they’d shut up now about psychics and aliens, with everything that’s happened,” Marci continues, “but I swear, it’s like they’ve only gotten crazier to compete.”

Not crazy enough, Foggy thinks.

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zombie boy meets the devil.

Will Byers meets Daredevil on a dark and not-so-stormy night.

It goes like this:

"Did you find anything?" Jane asks over the phone, as Will walks down the sidewalk, one hand tucked into his pocket. Hell's Kitchen had been one of the places Jonathan had hit up, chasing down leads on Fisk and Trainer and working from the bottom up, and Will had hoped maybe, just maybe—

"Not much," he says, and even without seeing Jane he can sense the disappointment and anxiety rolling off her in waves. "Most of the people Jonathan talked to didn't feel like talking to a new guy about what they knew." He sighs, and stops underneath a stoplight as the cars pass by. "What about you?"

"Not much, either," Jane says, sounding frustrated. *"The lab didn't pan out, I'm heading back to New York now and I'll be there first thing in the morning tomorrow. Hop and Mom said to say hi, by the way."*

"Tell them I said hi back," says Will, warmly. "And tell Mom that we'll find them."

"I told her that last part already," says Jane. *"She's—doing okay. As okay as anyone can be."*

Will knows what she means—his mother has already gone through this once before, and this time she's states away, too far to be able to help find her son. She must be panicking by now, clinging on to the hope that Jonathan's still alive, because after all, Will came out alive, and he was alone.

But Hawkins and the Upside Down are not New York and its crime lords. With each passing hour Will's more and more scared that Jonathan and Nancy and Steve have crossed someone they shouldn't have crossed, and one day he's going to get a little gift in the mail and so will his mom and—

He shivers.

"He's alive," says Jane, with certainty. *"I'd know if he wasn't."*

Will breathes out, relief crashing down on him. Jane would know, is the thing, and much better than Will too. "Is he still here?" he says. "Not—there?"

The Upside Down, he means.

“No,” says Jane, and as cold a comfort it is, he’ll take it. “Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Get some sleep. Please.”

Will crosses the street, turns left. “I will,” he says.

“Will.”

He winces. She’s using that tone now, the one that means she can tell he’s lying to her. When they were younger, Dustin used to call it her *friends don’t lie* voice.

Dustin lives in Hell’s Kitchen now, doesn’t he? Maybe he can talk to him. Maybe Jonathan talked to him. He knows Mike did, up in Dustin’s big fancy office and got something out of it too.

“I’ll get some sleep,” he says, even though he’s honestly not sure if he can sleep. Not with his brother missing. God, being on this side of a missing persons case is maybe even more stressful, with all the uncertainty and the waiting and the fear that the worst has already happened. “I can’t promise it’ll be much, but I’ll try.”

“Okay,” says Jane, begrudgingly. “*Stay safe, all right?*”

“I will,” he promises. “You too, El.”

“Night, Will.”

“Night, El.”

He ends the call, stuffs his phone back into his pocket, and sighs. Two weeks ago his biggest worry had been meeting that deadline for the *Wonder Woman* comic. Now he’s missed it and it doesn’t matter, because his brother is *missing*.

This is how Jonathan must’ve felt twenty years ago, when Will was in the Upside Down and their mom was spiraling downward. It’s not a great feeling, this roiling mass of anxiety and fear, churning in his

stomach and squeezing icy tentacles around his lungs. It feels like—

He shuts down that thought before it can go any further.

Then someone yanks him into an alleyway. A thug with nappy hair and a gun, he realizes when the guy slams him up against the wall, the barrel pressing up against Will's chin.

"Give me all your money and your phone," he snarls, eyes wide and bloodshot. "*Now.*"

Will chokes, but manages to nod. The guy moves back, and Will pulls out his wallet and his phone and hands them both over. This isn't a fight he wants to pick, and he'd rather have it over with as soon as possible.

The guy pulls the money out of Will's wallet, stuffs it into his pockets. Then he aims the gun at Will again. "He said not to let you go," he says.

A chill runs up Will's spine. "Who said not to let me go?" he asks.

"The King of the Kitchen," says the man, and Will's pretty sure the guy's high, from the way his eyes dart around. "But he—he won't mind, if I take a little bit off you. Not at all. See, it's a win-win all around." He smiles. It's truly disgusting.

"Fisk can't do anything to you," says Will. "He's in prison."

"*Don't say his name!*" screams the man.

"Just let me go, please," Will says, "my brother, he's missing—"

"That's why I can't let you go," says the man, and he sounds almost apologetic. "You've been snooping. You and that other fella, whasshisname, Cloudy—"

Who the fuck is named *Cloudy*?

"—but the King's got something special planned for *him*," the guy goes on. "Something real special." He thumbs the safety back. "You're just not special enough."

Will shuts his eyes, and hopes his mom will be okay.

Then he hears the snap of bone, the clatter of a gun, and the man screams. He opens his eyes—

—and a man in black descends from the rooftops. There's a bandana tied around his eyes, but it doesn't seem to slow him down as he ducks a knife, jabs up into the man's ribcage. The thug howls, and tries to swing at him again, but the man in black almost dances around and kicks his knee out.

The sickening crack is enough to get Will moving, sprinting out of the alley as fast as he can. He'll get a new phone, new cards, he's still got some burner phones and walkie-talkies at home anyway and thank god for Hopper's insistence on back-ups—

A hand claps a handkerchief over his mouth, the second he stops to rest. "Hey there, *zombie boy*," someone greets him. "Going somewhere?"

Troy.

Oh, god, he knows this smell. *Chloroform*. He's already got a lungful of it, and panic sets in first before he remembers Hopper's advice.

He claws at Troy's hand, grabs his ring finger, and pulls as hard as he can. He thinks he hears something break as Troy screams and drops the handkerchief, lets go of him. He staggers—how long does it take for chloroform to take effect, he wonders. Probably not all that long, his legs feel all wobbly like jelly.

His vision swims. There's two Troys now, both of them with knives, snarling something about the King of the Kitchen. He should run. He has to run.

His legs won't cooperate.

Then the man in black emerges from the shadows, throwing something at Troy's head. Troy whips around, swears at him, and charges as Will collapses to the concrete.

Through a dreamlike haze, he sees the man in black duck, jab, punch

hard. He fights like a boxer, Will thinks, like the guys in the videos Will watched to get a better sense of how some of Wonder Woman's enemies would fight her. It's weird, watching this, like a scene right out of a comic book.

He shuts his eyes, and drifts into the darkness.

3. you're wondering if i'm okay

Summary for the Chapter:

"Didn't I tell you to stay safe?" says Jane.

"I tried very hard not to break that promise," Will solemnly says.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time".

home of the devil.

When Will next opens his eyes, he's lying on a mattress in the middle of someone's dark, leaky, empty apartment.

For a moment he's terrified—this must be an episode, he must be in the Upside Down again, oh god not now, *not now*—

"You all right?" a rough voice asks, and Will relaxes, his breath slowing. It's probably screwed up that he relaxes at that, at the sound of a stranger's voice, but if there's someone in the room with him then that means he's not in the Upside Down.

He pushes himself up to a sitting position, and almost immediately regrets it, because his head swims. He squints at the man, and says, "You're the Devil of Hell's Kitchen."

Because, well.

It's pretty obvious, even without the horns. Will had seen him flipping around like a Russian gymnast, fighting like a boxer, and he's a lot of things, but he isn't blind.

"Smart," says the Devil. Up close he's just a man, and one who's done kind of a bad job patching himself up, if the way he's manfully holding his side is any indication. "Lie down. The amount of chloroform you inhaled, you're lucky you're up."

Chloroform. *Troy*.

Oh, god.

“What time is it?” he asks, worriedly. “Did you get my phone, my sister’s probably calling—”

“I’ve got your phone,” says the Devil, pulling a familiar phone out. Thankfully it’s not so damaged from the fight that it’s unusable, so Will checks his missed calls and texts and breathes a sigh of relief. “Your wallet too. You should stop cutting through alleyways next time.”

“You should get someone who can stitch you up better,” says Will.

“Oh, this,” says the Devil. “It’s—an old injury. I’m fine.”

“No you’re not,” says Will. “What did you do, pull the stitches or something?”

The Devil remains silent. Will lets out a long, slow breath. He can’t believe this. First Jonathan and Nancy and Steve go missing, then he gets mugged and almost killed or kidnapped by Troy and his new buddy for Wilson Fisk, and now that he’s been rescued by the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen himself he finds out the guy went out with recent stitches.

New fucking York.

“It’s nothing you should be worried about,” says the Devil. He stands and grits his teeth noticeably.

Will stares up at him, and then sighs. “Let me take a look,” he says. “I did some first-aid on my friends a few times, I can at least see how bad it is.” He doesn’t say that much of it came after multiple near-death experiences with carnivorous extradimensional creatures. It’s not something the Devil should know about.

“You,” says the Devil, flatly.

“Me,” says Will. “Just—I’m warning you right here and now, I’m not a professional and I’m still feeling the chloroform. If it’s bad, really

bad? I'm calling my friend Mike and we'll drag you to the hospital if we have to."

"No hospitals," says the Devil.

"Then you better hope it's not bad," says Will.

The Devil's jaw tenses, stubborn. He says as he turns to walk away, "Thanks for the offer, sir, but I can manage on my own."

Will shrugs, but worry still bubbles up in his chest. "It's still on the table if you need it," he says. "And it's Will. Will Byers."

The Devil stops in his tracks, and he doesn't have to see his face to know the Devil knows his name. That's weird, Will didn't know vigilantes read comic books. Then again, maybe that's where they get the idea in the first place.

"I've heard about you," says the Devil, cocking an ear towards him, eventually. "I—had a friend who talked about you, once."

Had.

Will's heart kind of breaks for this guy. He's grieving, he thinks, for someone he loved and lost.

"I'm sorry," he offers. "For your loss."

With a mask on and in the dim light, it's hard to tell what the Devil's thinking. But eventually he just nods, as if accepting Will's condolences. "I hope you find your brother," he says.

And just like that Will's suddenly more awake than he was before. "Did you see him?" he asks. "Did you—Did you hear anything about him? Did he talk to you?"

"I didn't see him," says the Devil. "But I did hear him asking around after Wilson Fisk and Carolyn Trainer, a few days ago."

"Do you know anything about what happened to him?" Will asks, desperately. "Where he might've gone?"

The Devil opens up the window, and seems to look in Will's direction. Probably. He's got a mask over his eyes, for all Will knows he's just looking at the wall. "No and no," he says, and he sounds almost sad. "But I'll keep an ear to the ground and let you know if I find anything."

"Please," says Will.

And the Devil just nods, before he leaps out of the window.

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in the heights.

Max runs into Luke Cage and Danny Rand at a mom-and-pop store in Washington Heights.

She doesn't actually mean to. She's just there because she's digging into Steve's whereabouts, and she vaguely recalls him praising this tiny little bodega to high heaven. *You get the best café con leche there*, he had said to her over the phone, and she'd promised, next time she and Lucas came to town, she'd drop by and check it out.

She hears bickering as the owner's making her the house specialty. "The hell?" she says.

The guy—Usnavi's his name, which is a little weird if you ask her—just chuckles a little, and puts the coffee in front of her. "Danny Rand and Luke Cage," he says. "Danny's kind of popular around here, he's got a habit of buying up buildings and lowering the rents."

"Seriously?" says Max, incredulously. Who buys up a building to lower the rents? "Holy shit. You're kidding me."

"I swear I'm not!" says Usnavi, holding his hands up. "And Luke's the hero of Harlem, but we've heard of him up in the Heights too. He's my best friend's hero."

Max leans against the counter, and watches the rich boy and the hero of Harlem arguing over something.

"Not very heroic, right now," she says.

"You expect celebrities to act like celebrities all the time?" says Usnavi, which, point. "Anyway, whenever they're around things feel a whole lot safer." He chuckles a little and adds, "Though sometimes a reporter comes sniffing around for them."

Max's coffee freezes halfway to her lips. "This reporter," she says, neutrally, "what did they look like?"

"She looked pretty good," says Usnavi. "Blue eyes, blonde hair—"

"Not who I'm looking for," says Max, disappointment lying heavy in her stomach.

"So who are you looking for?" says Usnavi.

"One of your regulars," says Max. "Steve Harrington—guy with the hair?" She gestures vaguely toward her own hair, chopped short so she wouldn't have to deal with helmet hair so much after grueling stunts.

Usnavi snaps his fingers. "Steve with the eighties hair!" he says, triumphantly. "Yeah, I know him, he swings by a lot. I don't know why he comes here so often, he and his special friends live real far from here, but he's not too bad."

Max leans on the counter, putting her coffee aside. She'll have it later, when her blood isn't thrumming with the promise of a lead, a real lead, on where Steve's gone. "When was the last time he was here?" she presses.

"Why, is something up?" says Usnavi, his eyebrows knitting together, real worry flashing in his eyes. "I mean, he's no Captain America but he's a chill fella, know what I mean?"

"I do," says Max. "Did he say anything weird, though?"

"This is *New York*," says Usnavi. "I get all kinds here." He waves a hand at Rand and Cage, with their heads bent over packs of instant ramen.

"Weird for him, personally," Max clarifies. "Like, was he acting nervous?"

Usnavi drums his fingers on the counter. “He had his girlfriend and his boyfriend with him,” he says. “That was—what, more than a week ago? And *Steve* wasn’t acting weird, ordered the same thing he usually did plus a black coffee each for the other two.” He props his chin up onto his hand, idly tapping out a beat now on the wooden counter. “Now, Nancy, *she* was acting a little weird. Kept looking around the store like she was watching out for something.”

“Do you have any idea what she might’ve been looking out for?” says Max.

“Either Luke or Danny,” says Usnavi. “Danny is *notorious* for dodging the paps, and he’s teaching Luke how to do it.” He leans over the counter and yells, “Am I right?”

“I dodge the paparazzi just fine!” Luke answers.

“You put your hoodie up and walk the other way,” says Danny, like this offends him down to his very core.

“I’m not as acrobatic as you,” says Luke.

Max huffs out a breath. Somehow she doubts Nancy was looking for these two chucklefucks.

“Oh, yeah, speaking of Steve,” says Usnavi, snapping her out of her thoughts, “can you tell him to come by when you see him? I haven’t seen him around in a while, and—he’s not half-bad, for a white guy with that hair.”

“I’ll let him know,” says Max, hoping her smile doesn’t look too fake. Judging from how worried Usnavi looks, that didn’t work out too well, so she ducks quickly out of the store.

She doesn’t get very far before the dynamic duo find her, and Rand says, “Hey—you know Steve and Jonathan?”

Max pauses in her steps. “Why are you asking?” she asks, suspicious.

“It’s just—” Rand starts, then stops. “We haven’t seen either in a while.”

"Haven't heard from Nancy," says Cage. "I don't suppose you know anything about what she might've been up to." His eyes watch her, and Max gets the feeling Cage has more of an idea what's going on than he lets on.

"Didn't know Steve was such a regular fixture around here," says Max. "Yeah, I know him. He used to be my babysitter." He'd done his best to keep them all safe, growing up, even after Billy had gotten locked away in prison. She owes him, for that. For his friendship. "You guys know anything about what they were up to?"

Cage and Rand exchange looks. It's the kind of exchange that speaks to a good long time spent hanging around each other, the kind Max used to see between Lucas and Mike and Will and—

—Dustin. Wherever and whoever the fuck he is now, after almost a year with barely any words to any of them. Just enough to tell himself he's kept in touch, she's sure, even though he's told them exactly zero about his life these days.

Cage sighs. "I think all three of us had better talk in private," he says.

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mouthbreather.

One of the first things Jane does when she's back in New York is to try and contact Will.

Over the years, she's gotten better at controlling her powers. Her theory is that, given the better home environment and the friends and Hop's steady presence, her powers had been allowed to flourish and grow the way they couldn't in the lab. Now she barely even needs the white noise anymore, but she pulls over anyway, fiddles with the car radio till all she can hear is static. Then she pulls her handkerchief out of her jacket and ties it around her head, covering her eyes.

She breathes in, breathes out, and lets herself sink downwards, reaching out for Will.

When she opens her eyes, she's in the Void again. Water soaks

through into her shoes, and she looks around, spies Will lying on a mattress. His neck looks a little bruised up, and for a moment Jane's anger almost blinds her.

Then Will pokes his head up and frowns adorably at her. Or at thin air. "El?" he says.

"Will," she says, kneeling down next to him. "Are you all right?"

Will sighs. He doesn't see her, he looks in entirely the wrong direction for that, but he says all the same, "Yeah, I'm fine. Got mugged last night—"

"Didn't I tell you to stay safe?" says Jane.

"I tried very hard not to break that promise," Will solemnly says.

"I don't blame you," says Jane, "but—*still*."

"I'm okay," says Will, shrugging. "But, uh. Don't freak out."

Jane raises an eyebrow. Oh, this is going to be bad, she thinks. "Spit it out," she tells him, and cringes a little at how much she sounds like Hop, when they were all younger and he was rapidly losing patience with anyone's bullshit.

"I met Daredevil," says Will. "He, uh. He actually saved my ass after Troy chloroformed me. Did you know Troy moved to New York?"

Jane lets the silence stretch on for another moment. Then she says, very evenly and with an admirable amount of restraint, "Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you need me to get you out of there?"

Will shakes his head. "Not really, no," he says. "And before you ask, no, you can't go after Troy. For one thing, I don't know where he is."

"I could find him," Jane says.

"For another," Will adds, "I figured out what Jonathan was looking

into for Nancy.” He sucks in a breath, and says, “Fisk isn’t as gone as Dustin might think he is.”

“What?” says Jane. “*Who?* Will—”

Will starts, looks straight at Jane. Somewhere in the distance, she hears a man’s voice, low and rough. *Think I might need that look, after all.* “I have to go,” he whispers, and just like that he fades into dust, slipping through Jane’s fingers.

Jane startles awake, yanks the blindfold off of her head. “*Shit,*” she breathes, borrowing a phrase from her old friend Dustin.

Dustin. She has to find him. Luckily for her his apartment isn’t too far away, but *unluckily* New York traffic’s grown thicker while she was off on her little sojourn, so she clambers out of her car and locks the doors. There’s not much there to steal, anyway, and she can track her car if someone thinks to steal that.

She sets off down the sidewalk, mind whirling with noise. She’s better at this, usually, better at filtering out the noise of the city and focusing on what’s important, but Daredevil might have just kidnapped Will, she isn’t sure, but she knows just where to start—

She rounds a corner, and someone’s hot coffee splashes on her. She jumps back with a yelp.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*, watch where you’re *going*,” snaps the woman. She’s swaying on her feet, sunglasses hiding her eyes, but Jane can feel the glare on her, anyway.

She bristles. “Why don’t *you* watch where you’re going?” she snaps at her. “Since you’re the one with the coffee and all.”

“Ugh,” the woman grumbles. “I so don’t have time for this.” And with that, she pushes past Jane, turns a corner, and disappears.

Jane huffs. “Mouthbreather,” she mutters, and continues on her way, pulling out her phone to dial Mike’s number and putting the woman in the leather jacket out of her mind.

She has more important things to focus on.

4. i didn't come to set you free

Summary for the Chapter:

"The fuck is that thing on my desk," Jessica says, after a minute spent on gaping at it in shock. This cannot be happening.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from St. Vincent's "Lazarus".

royal dragon.

The Royal Dragon's still standing, months after the chaos of Midland Circle's fall, and the owner grins delightedly when he sees Luke and Danny, and the new girl in tow.

"My best customers!" he cheers, then he takes a look at the redhead. "Who is this friend of yours, though? Because if she's the same way Ms. Jones is—"

"Who?" says the woman.

"She's not," Luke reassures him. "Can we come in?"

"Of course, of course," says the owner, stepping aside. He and Danny quickly get into an animated conversation about God only knows what, so Luke just finds them a booth and sits down across from the redhead, who's checking over the menu with interest.

"How are the wontons here?" she says.

"Not bad," says Luke.

"I'll have those," she tells the waiter, and Luke gives him his order as well. The moment the guy's off, she leans in closer and says, "You know Steve."

"Nancy, actually, but I know her husbands too," says Luke. "But first—I haven't gotten your name yet." And he makes it something of a

point not to give away info on people he knows to random strangers asking after them.

“All right,” says the woman. She sticks her hand out and says, “Max Sinclair.”

Oh.

“Claire’s told me about you,” says Luke, with a grin, shaking her hand.

“Oh, you know Claire!” says Max, her face lighting up.

“She knows Claire?” says Danny, sliding in beside Luke. “You know Claire? How many people know Claire already?”

“You’d be surprised,” says Luke, remembering her talking impatiently with a famous Broadway actor last week. Apparently the guy’d had a stint in Metro General once and he owed her a favor. “How’d you guys meet?”

“My husband was her roommate in college,” says Max. “They hit it off right away and he introduced her to me.” She shrugs. “I haven’t kept in touch with her, I didn’t realize she knew you guys.”

“Apparently she knows a lot of people,” says Danny, admiring.

“Seems like,” says Max. “But right now I’m more interested in you two—you guys know Nancy, and Steve, and Jonathan.”

“Less Jonathan and more Steve, actually,” says Luke. “Byers isn’t the most open person there is.”

“He showed me how to work one of those old cameras, though,” says Danny.

“Yeah, and now Colleen complains your place smells like chemicals,” says Luke. “You’re not cut out to be a hipster.”

“What’s a hipster?” says Danny, and, oh, right. Magical mystical ancient city that’s disconnected from the world outside. Of course he doesn’t know what a hipster is, and Luke finds himself debating

telling him.

“A douchebag who romanticizes a past they never experienced a little too much,” says Max, cheerfully, which Luke supposes solves his problem. “Did he, Nancy or Steve mention anything to you guys about what they were doing?”

Luke drums his fingers against the table, as the waiter drops off their plates. “Now that you mention it,” he says, “Nancy asked me to keep an eye out for weird things going down in Harlem. Let her know if something was off.”

“A specific kind of off?” Max presses. “Or just—off, in general?”

“Specific,” says Luke. “Shady vans, strange noises, people going missing—she worried bodies would be dropping.”

“Have they?” says Max, and Danny shoots him an alarmed look. It’s only by the grace of god that he doesn’t also open his mouth and try to talk while he’s eating.

Luke racks his memory for anything that Nancy asked him to look out for. “There was a white van last night,” he says, at last. “Saw a guy coming out, said he was doing maintenance and repairs—there was a telephone pole that toppled over in that earthquake six months ago, and putting the new one up was a little fiddly, to say the least.” It had been a little strange, that the pole was getting another look so soon after the last inspection, but there wasn’t much Luke could do—big black man in a hoodie, walking around at night? Already suspicious enough, for some people. He’d left the guy alone.

He’d also left the Byers-Wheeler-Harrington trio a voicemail.

“Why didn’t you try to get answers out of him?” says Danny. “If you knew something was weird.”

“I *suspected* something was weird, that’s why I left Nancy a message,” says Luke. “But, and here’s the thing, I wasn’t sure. I asked him what he was doing, he said maintenance and repairs. I think he was a little terrified.”

“Of you?” says Danny, incredulous.

"Of a big man in a hoodie," says Luke. "No doubt he'd be more receptive to Max, or even to you, if he saw either of you. Me?" He snorts out a tired laugh. "I haven't gotten a spare hoodie yet. I wasn't looking forward to having to explain to the cops what I was doing questioning a clearly terrified man, never mind why he'd be so scared of me." And never mind the fact that Luke wasn't the one driving an unmarked white van around.

Danny's lips thin, his eyes taking on that *look* that Luke has come to know as the one he gets when he runs up against an injustice he can't do anything about. "I could talk to the guy," he says, almost recklessly. "Or we could."

"Don't," says Max, suddenly. "*Don't*."

"We can take care of ourselves," says Luke.

"Luke's *bulletproof*," says Danny, "and I'm the Immortal Iron Fist."

"I won't even pretend I know what that means," says Max, "but whatever this is, it's connected to—something you don't want to be mixed up in."

She's keeping something back. Her, and Nancy too—Luke remembers the way her eyes darted around when she talked to him, like she was scared of something she couldn't see. "I don't know about Danny," he says, "but I'd like to know what I'm keeping an eye out for."

Danny says, "Yeah, actually, me too. She asked me the same thing." He pauses and says, "And to keep an eye on Carolyn Trainer too, though I don't really know about that last one."

Max runs her teeth over her lower lip, as if debating with herself. Then she shakes her head, almost apologetic. "I can't tell you a lot about it," she says. "Just—let me and Lucas know if you hear anything from Nancy or Steve or Jonathan, all right?" She pauses, then adds, "And if that van comes back."

She yanks a napkin out of the napkin holder, pulls a pen out of the inside of her jacket to scrawl a couple of numbers down. Luke would admire her preparedness, if he wasn't growing more and more

suspicious.

Something's up here, he thinks, and whatever it is, Nancy, Steve, Jonathan, and Claire's friends are in the middle of it.

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pollywogs, care and keeping of.

Jessica pulls the door open and blinks at Malcolm and Trish.

"The fuck is that thing on my desk," she says, after a minute spent on gaping at it in shock. This *cannot* be happening.

"It's a terrarium," says Malcolm, breaking off chunks of chocolate for some—slug with arms, apparently, rolling around in the hastily-assembled terrarium. Yep, this is happening.

"I know what that is, what's *that*?" says Jessica, feeling a headache coming on. She's too hungover for this. First some tourist bumps into her on the street, now this. God, what a day she's having.

"We don't actually know!" says Trish. "Working theory is that it's a pollywog."

"A what?"

"Sort of like a tadpole," Malcolm explains. "We're not sure if it is a pollywog yet, and I couldn't really keep it at my apartment." He shrugs, and adds, "What with the new kitten and all."

"And I've got no room or time for a pet," says Trish, wistfully.

"And you guys thought," starts Jessica, trying to wrap her head around this new insanity that has cropped up in her life, "that I'm the best choice."

Jesus. This might be worse than the ninjas.

"More like your office was the best choice," says Malcolm. "Little guy's pretty low-maintenance. He's not a big fan of heat lamps or light in general, and the heating broke in my place, so."

"You better not name it after me," says Jessica, folding her arms. "And get the terrarium off my desk."

"Don't worry, it'll come off," Trish assures her, leaning against the edge of her desk as Malcolm mutters something to the slug, something that sounds like *what about it, you feel like a Jonesy?* "We were actually waiting up on you." She looks Jessica up and down and says, her brow furrowing, "You okay? You look like someone spilled coffee on you."

Jessica stares at her in shock, her grip growing slack enough that her empty cup clatters to the floor. Then she says, "Some tourist asshole." She sighs, then turns to the terrarium.

Turns out, even with super-strength, it takes a while to move a full-size terrarium with an active inhabitant from her desk to the table that Trish has designated as the best place to keep a mysterious probable pollywog/tadpole/what the fuck ever. The damn creature makes agitated noises the whole time, shrill little shrieks that grate on Jessica's ears.

"Shut the fuck up," she tells it, as she puts it none-too-gently down on the table. "You guys are taking care of it," she tells Trish and Malcolm. "I'm willing to let it stay here so you can coo over it, but I am *not* pet owner material." She points at Trish. "Don't think this means I'll get the dog you keep saying I should get."

"Oh, believe me, I've noticed," says Malcolm.

"I haven't said that in a while," says Trish, with a huff. "But—thanks, anyway. And hey, think of it this way." She walks over to the terrarium, pats the top of it gently. "You'll have a great conversation piece."

"What the hell would I even need a conversation piece for," Jessica grumbles, but there's no real heat behind it. She sighs, and rubs at her eyes. "No one steps into this office to make conversation. And where'd you find this thing, anyway?"

"Someone dumped it in a basket on my doorstep," says Trish. "With a note about how I'd enjoy the pet. It was a little surreal."

“Like *Harry Potter* but with a slug instead of a baby,” says Jessica.

“Hey, be nice to Nougat,” says Malcolm, breaking up another chocolate bar into little bits. He drops the bits into the terrarium, and the slug happily chows down on them. It’s almost adorable watching it go hungrily at them, in a gross and slimy kind of way. “He might be a new species. You don’t know.”

“Joy, you named it,” Jessica mutters. “*Nougat*, Jesus Christ. Your gross new species had better not slimed all over my papers or my beer.”

“I promise he hasn’t slimed all over your papers or your alcohol,” says Malcolm, with a little grin.

Jessica sighs, and takes a seat. She pulls out a case file and says, “So, anyway, I found out where that Scott Truman went haring off to...”

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friends don't—

Ratatat-tat-tat, tat-tat.

Some years ago, Dustin had taught his friend El the barber’s knock—a secret knock, that she could use to recognize him and Mike and the rest from Hopper, Joyce, the teens, and—in the worst-case scenario—Bad Men. They’d been hanging out all day, with Dustin allegedly tutoring her in Geography. Technically he had been, and it was perfectly all right to use the map Will had drawn up for their latest campaign and maybe ease her into possibly playing with them.

One thing had led to another, from El asking about swords to magic doors to how exactly someone could open a magic door in the game, and Dustin found himself showing her a possible way, rapping out *shave and a haircut, two bits* on the table. When he’d left, he’d promised that next time he’d use it, and she’d know it was him.

Ratatat-tat-tat, tat-tat.

Foggy snaps out of his memories at the second try. “Coming!” he calls, throwing on a jacket before he pulls the door open.

“What took you so long?” says Jane Wheeler, arching a brow.

“I had to look presentable first,” says Foggy, letting her in. “Hey, El. How was the book tour?”

“It was both wonderful and stressful,” says Jane, and Foggy shuts the door behind them. “But we both know that’s not what you want to talk about, so come on, out with it.”

Friends don’t lie.

“Steve,” says Foggy, quiet. “Do you know where he is? Where Jonathan and Nancy are? Can you tell?”

Jane sighs. “I know they’re in New York,” she says as she flops onto the couch, as Foggy moves into the kitchen, rummaging for coffee. “*This* New York. They’re still alive. What I don’t know is *where*, exactly—something’s blocking me when I try to concentrate on them. It did when I tried to look for them from Hawkins Lab.”

“So someone or something is shielding them from you,” says Foggy, his hands admirably steady as he fires up the coffeemaker, pours the beans in. He’s not going to lie, he’s—freaking out a little, at the thought. Jane’s the most powerful psychic he knows. If someone’s shielding from her, something bad’s about to brew.

Okay, Jane is the only psychic he knows, but still.

“That’s the working theory,” says Jane. “They could’ve been out of range, but—”

She shakes her head. Foggy knows what she means, he’s seen her track down a woman in trouble in Chicago all the way from Hawkins. Something else is at work here.

“And I have some bad news, too,” she adds, drumming her fingers anxiously against Foggy’s cheap antique coffee table.

“Can it wait until you’ve got coffee in your hands?” says Foggy.

“Well, sure,” says Jane. For a moment she’s quiet as Foggy works, before she says, “You don’t exactly talk with us very often, anymore.”

"I'm a pretty busy guy," says Foggy, his back to her as he pours her a cup of coffee. "You still take yours with cream?"

"And three sugars," says Jane. Foggy dutifully obeys, dumping three spoonfuls of sugar into her cup. "You stopped before Hogarth, Chao & Benowitz."

"Probably the Punisher trial," says Foggy. "We were all under a lot of stress then, me and Karen and—"

And Matt.

"Me and my friends," Foggy amends. He sucks in a breath and exhales, air hissing past his teeth.

"Probably," says Jane, but she doesn't sound quite so convinced. Damn, Foggy's clearly got to work on that more. Jane's smarter than most of the people Foggy's under at HCB. "But the fact remains: we don't talk a lot anymore."

"Not much to talk about," says Foggy.

"Dustin," says Jane. Shit, it's her *friends don't lie* voice.

"I'm telling the truth." Not all of it.

"Your friend, Matt," says Jane. "What happened to him and your law firm?"

Oh, god.

Foggy moves around to the couch, sets the two mugs down on the coffee table. Carved into one corner are two crude avocados, one wearing dark red glasses, the other sporting a lovely mane of blonde(-ish) hair.

"Matt is missing," he says, heavily. He *lies*, not looking at Jane.

"He's gone?" Jane asks, quiet. *Dead*, she means.

Foggy shuts his eyes, breathes in and out. "I don't know," he says. Another lie. "Not for sure." He's pretty damn sure, even if they never

found a body. “Maybe.”

Jane’s brown eyes are shadowed with ghosts, when she says, “I’m sorry, Dustin. About—your loss.” She picks up her coffee and takes a sip.

“You and everyone else in my firm,” says Foggy, with barely any heat. Jane’s at least more sincere about it than most. His eye catches, briefly, on the old *Nelson & Murdock* sign, now hidden behind books on law and files thicker than his arm. Then he looks away and back to Jane. “But forget about that. You said you had bad news.”

Jane sighs. “Wilson Fisk is back,” she says.

“He’s *in prison*,” says Foggy, trying for casual and falling so very short of it.

“It hasn’t stopped him,” Jane points out, which, goddammit, she’s right. “It’s like he never got thrown in at all.” She pauses, then sighs, takes a sip of her mug, and says, “And something else. Will got mugged here.”

Foggy all but jumps out of the couch. “I need to get my phone,” he says, urgently. “What’s Will’s number again? Did Mrs. Byers change hers?”

“You won’t need your phone,” says Jane. “I tracked Will down, he said some interesting stuff.”

Foggy doesn’t sit back down. His stomach’s tying itself into too many knots. “What kind of stuff?” he asks, wondering how he can sound so calm.

“Did you know that Daredevil’s back?” says Jane, and Foggy’s world tilts sideways.

5. the world around us is burning

Summary for the Chapter:

“Luke?” he whispers.

Luke looks up. “What is that thing?” he says. “What are we in, a horror movie?”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Twenty One Pilots' "Fairly Local".

the wound.

“So this is where that van was?” says Danny. He and Luke are standing outside an alleyway in Harlem, and to his eyes the telephone pole hasn’t gotten repaired last night. “What do you think they were doing?”

“Moving drugs,” says Luke. “Moving weapons. I don’t know for sure, but I do know it’s something bad.”

“Do you think it’s the Hand?” says Danny, stomach tying into knots at the thought of the Hand somehow, impossibly, emerging from the rubble of Midland Circle to terrorize the city once more.

Luke snorts out a laugh, and shakes his head. It’s enough for Danny to relax, a little. “Don’t think so,” he says. “Something else, maybe. Whatever spooked Nancy and spooks Max, I think.”

“What could spook *Nancy Wheeler*?” says Danny. Nancy’s the kind of reporter that Danny is a little bit in awe of, cut from the same cloth as Karen Page—the truth-seeker, the one to illuminate the darker corners of the city. If something scared *her*—

Well, it’s a good thing he can summon the Iron Fist. It’s a good thing Luke is bulletproof.

Luke nudges Danny, and says, “Stay behind me. Anything happens, I’ll take the brunt and you light it up.”

“Got it,” says Danny. He falls in behind Luke, tugging his scarf up to hide his mouth and nose.

Something is *wrong* here. He knows this from the moment he steps into the alleyway. It’s as if the minute they moved from the outside world to the shadowed alley, the very air itself *changed*. He focuses his chi, clenches his hand into a fist.

Luke’s gone tense, ahead of him. His steps slow to a more deliberate pace.

His foot bumps up against a dead body, leaning against a dumpster.

“Sweet Christmas,” whispers Luke.

Danny’s stomach lurches. “This is the guy you saw?” he asks, staring down at the man’s remains. Something’s taken a great big chunk out of the guy’s chest, feasted on his organs, and Danny can see strips of muscle still clinging to the corpse’s ribcage, exposed to the air.

The guy’s mouth is still open. He was screaming when he died, alone and afraid in a dark alleyway.

Someone should’ve smelled this. Someone should’ve *heard* this. He looks at Luke, sees his fists clenching, and he realizes—Luke hadn’t *known*.

“You didn’t know,” says Danny. “You *didn’t know*.”

Luke shakes his head. “Some hero, huh,” he mutters, kneeling down. “Never seen anything like this. You?”

Danny licks his lips, shakes his head. “There were tales in K’un-Lun, about creatures that feasted on human flesh,” he says, “but I never ran into any. To tell you the truth, I didn’t even know any existed.” He looks up from the corpse, then catches sight of the—the *wound*, for lack of a better term, down the alleyway.

“Luke?” he whispers.

Luke looks up. “What is that thing?” he says. “What are we in, a horror movie?”

Danny pauses, then shifts a little bit closer to Luke.

“Bulletproof,” Luke says.

“Yeah, but I watch horror movies, I’m not stupid,” Danny mutters. The last time he saw Matt Murdock replays, in the back of his mind, the way it has since he took up Matt’s mantle as the protector of Hell’s Kitchen.

No one else is dying. Not on his watch.

“I’m touched,” says Luke. “But between the two of us, you’re a lot more easily mauled than me. Stay behind, and if anything happens —”

“Light it up,” Danny finishes. He can see the logic there, even if in his head he keeps seeing Matt, hearing his voice, *protect my city*. Luke isn’t Matt. Luke’s got a healthy sense of self-preservation and hates it when buildings collapse on him. “Got it.”

He stays behind Luke, as they walk slowly and deliberately towards the wound in the wall. Bile rises in his throat—something is wrong here, very very wrong, beyond the obvious fact that there is a wound in the wall and it is fucking *pulsing*, or breathing, or whatever. Something is off with the flow of energy, around this place, like the very presence of the wound has warped it, turned it upside-down.

He’d say it out loud to Luke, but he’s pretty sure it’d fly over his head.

Once they get close, Danny says, “What do you think it is?”

“No idea,” says Luke. “Something out of sci-fi, that’s for sure. Nothing that should be in Harlem.”

Danny squints. There’s—*something* just beyond the wound, he realizes, something inside that pulsing, glowing membrane. He wonders, with a start, if it’s the thing that killed and ate Luke’s guy.

“I think we’ve seen enough,” says Luke. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Hey,” says Danny, an idea occurring to him, “remember when I used

the power of the Iron Fist to heal up Jessica after she accidentally broke up a drug ring?”

“She called it *iron fisting*,” says Luke.

“She holds nothing sacred except Trish and booze,” says Danny. “But yeah, that. What if we can close this up using the Iron Fist?”

“You’re kidding,” says Luke, flatly.

“Whatever ate your guy,” says Danny, waving a hand at the corpse, “it wasn’t human. It might’ve come from here.”

“You’re saying it’s a portal?” says Luke. “Like that hole in the sky that opened up over Stark Tower?”

“I’m saying it can’t hurt to try,” says Danny.

Luke sighs, and says, “All right, fine. Do the thing, but if anything goes wrong, I’m getting you out of here, and we’re getting reinforcements.”

“Oh, that’ll be fun,” says Danny, summoning the power of the Iron Fist, his hand beginning to glow. “Jessica Jones versus the weird portal-wound in the wall.” He can just imagine it now.

He touches the membrane.

It happens all too fast—his scream, Luke’s shout, a hand grabbing his leg, the two of them getting *sucked* inside—

Danny blacks out.

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left behind.

“Daredevil’s dead,” says Dustin, flatly, after a moment of total silence.

“Really?” says Jane, surprised. She hadn’t expected to hear that. “Will seemed convinced the man who found him was Daredevil.”

“Daredevil wears—*wore* a mask,” says Dustin. “It’s easy enough to fake his reappearance, but the fact is, Daredevil died six months ago.” He straightens up, scrubs his hand over his face. It’s maybe the truest thing he’s told her since she stepped into his apartment. “You don’t survive a building collapsing on you that easily.”

“Midland Circle,” says Jane, the puzzle pieces clicking into place in her head. “Were you—”

“No, I was in the precinct at the time,” says Dustin, looking at her now. He’s not great at hiding his feelings, still, and she can see the grief shadowing his eyes, the way his eyes flick downward, starting to water. He turns away, a hand going up to his face. “I was working on a case, and then I heard from someone who saw—he didn’t get out in time.”

She looks at his sign, hidden behind the books and files, like a precious secret. *Nelson & Murdock, Attorneys at Law*. She thinks she might have some idea, where Matt Murdock must’ve gone, why Dustin can’t seem to tell her the truth anymore.

Friends don’t lie. They do, however, protect their friends’ secrets, and sometimes that means lying to people. She should know.

If Matt Murdock is—*was* Daredevil, then—it makes sense, that Dustin went silent, that he’s been ducking behind technical truths and outright falsehoods. It still stings, to know that Dustin’s keeping something from her, but it isn’t his secret to tell, any more than the little girl in Mike’s basement had been his secret to tell so long ago.

“So if Daredevil’s dead,” she says, deciding to let him keep the illusion a little while longer, “who do you think has Will?”

“I don’t know,” says Dustin, turning back to her, his jaw tight, “but whoever it is, it’s highly likely they’re seriously bad news. Can you track Will down again?”

Jane’s almost offended. It’s the *Millennium Falcon* toy all over again, honestly. “*Can I*,” she says. “Of course.” She pulls Will’s picture out of her pocket, the one where he’s grinning at the camera with his first real graphic novel. “Why do you think I’m carrying this around?”

“Sentiment,” says Dustin.

“Partly,” Jane allows.

“Do you still need a radio?” says Dustin. “Or—white noise, of any kind? I can pull something up from YouTube.”

“Not really, no,” says Jane, pulling her blindfold out of her pocket. “Just close the curtains and stay quiet, unless you really need to say something.”

Dustin closes the curtains, then digs up his old walkie-talkie anyway from his bedroom. She smiles when she sees it in his hands. “You kept it,” she says.

“It’s saved my life in Hawkins a few times,” says Dustin, fiddling with it. “And I’m a pretty sentimental guy.” He sets the walkie-talkie down on the table once all they can hear out of it is static, and says, “Tell Will—I missed him. I missed you. Everyone.”

Jane nods. “I will,” she says, before she ties the blindfold over her eyes, and sinks into the darkness once more.

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the missing.

Jonathan wakes up.

“Nancy?” he mumbles, when he feels a hand taking his.

“I’m here,” says Nancy, quiet, her voice soft in the darkness. “I’m here, Jonathan.”

Jonathan opens his eyes. They’re still trapped in a dark, damp little cell, at the mercy of a horribly amoral scientist and a vengeful crime lord who somehow slipped out of prison, but at least Nancy’s looking better than she was when he and Steve got thrown in here.

Steve.

“Steve,” he croaks, wincing as he pushes himself up to a more

vertical position. Fisk definitely did a number on him. “Where is he?”

He sees the fury in Nancy’s eyes, and knows what’s happened even before she speaks. “Fisk’s thugs *took* him,” she spits. “Something about—Trainer, and a working theory she had about who the other children were.”

“Other children?” says Jonathan, his stomach twisting into knots. “You don’t mean—like El and Kali?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” says Nancy.

“She thinks Steve knows where they are,” says Jonathan.

Nancy shakes her head. “She thinks Steve’s one,” she says.

Jonathan opens his mouth. Shuts it. Opens his mouth again. Shuts it again, and scrubs his hand over his face, hissing in pain when he accidentally prods his bruises. “That’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard,” he says. Steve Harrington, *psychic*. What a joke. “If living in Hawkins didn’t activate any dormant psychic abilities, I doubt whatever Trainer’s got could do the trick.”

“I said so too,” says Nancy. “Among other things.”

Yeah, Jonathan can make a guess at what those other things are. “We’ve gotta get out of here,” he says. “Get Steve out, warn Jane, Will, *Mom*—”

“Mike,” says Nancy, real fear in her voice. “Oh, god, they’re after them.”

Cold dread drops into Jonathan’s stomach, a heavy, leaden weight. “*Why?*” he asks, already expecting the answer to be *Hawkins, the Lab, everything*. Trainer has a reason to hate them all, for playing a part in Hawkins Lab’s downfall.

“Hawkins,” says Nancy, which isn’t a surprise. What is a surprise is what she says next: “But Fisk *hates* Dustin, more than anything. And he’s the one driving this whole operation.”

Jonathan remembers Dustin at thirteen, with his new dentures and

his hat and his science questions and his endless curiosity. He remembers Dustin before he left Hawkins, coming by the Byers house one last time to say goodbye before the move to New York. He remembers catching sight of him, once, leading a blind man down the sidewalk, the two of them with their heads bent together.

Dustin hadn't seen him, then. But Jonathan had seen *him*, and most importantly, in that short moment, he'd seen how happy Dustin had been. He'd seen it again, on the news, the sad smile on his face as he talked to a reporter about a woman named Elena, who'd stood up for her home, for what was right.

"We need to get out of here," says Jonathan, urgently. "Warn them. Warn *all* of them—"

"Mr. Byers," comes a voice, and Jonathan turns to see Wilson Fisk, dressed in a blinding white suit as he steps into the cell, "I am glad to see that you've finally woken up. I was—*afraid*, that the last time we spoke took too much of a toll on you." He nods to Nancy, whose hands have balled into fists, and says, "I would have—regretted it, if I had to come down here to tell Ms. Wheeler that you could not come back."

"*Where's Steve?*?" snarls Nancy.

Jonathan holds out his arm to keep her from charging Fisk. As much as he wants to pummel the guy too, the last time he tried to take a swing at him, Fisk had beat him until he was unconscious, and then thrown him and Steve into the back of a van. "I still don't know what you're talking about," he says, evenly.

"Franklin Nelson," says Fisk. "That is who I'm talking about. One of the two *amateurs* who put me in prison."

"Who?" says Jonathan, playing dumb.

"Perhaps that was my mistake," says Fisk, contemplatively. "His past is—not something he'd like to publicize, I am certain. But no matter. I looked into it, after Trainer mentioned his *connection* to Hawkins." He pulls out a file of photos, and Nancy snatches it up. Some of them fall out as she does, and Jonathan picks those up.

His heart crawls right into his throat. There's Dustin, at twelve, racing past security cameras with Mike and Lucas, Jane hanging on to Mike's back for dear life. There's thirteen-year-old Dustin's handwriting, detailing only some of what happened in that horrible week Will was gone. There's Dustin at fifteen, talking to Kali, who'd been a wanted woman, near the arcade. There's Dustin before he left Hawkins, a baseball bat in hand, a monster dead at his feet.

"You're going to blackmail him," says Nancy. There are more photos in that file, Jonathan thinks, more things that could compromise Dustin's standing in the legal community. That could ruin his *life*. "You *fucking*—"

She starts forward.

"You want your husband safe, don't you?" says Fisk, and Nancy makes a gutted noise, stumbling back as if Fisk dealt her a blow. Jonathan's fingers curl into fists. "As of now, Steve Harrington is still alive. I've instructed Trainer to take *great* care of him." He smiles, calmly. "I can, of course, instruct her otherwise, if I am displeased. Perhaps he wouldn't survive, if she were given free rein."

"You *bastard*," says Jonathan. He's going to kill him, he thinks. He's going to strangle the life out of him, for threatening Steve, for kidnapping Nancy, for putting so many people in the crossfire just to get to Dustin. "What is all this even *for*? Some—vendetta, on someone who was just doing their job?"

"What of the people who worked at the lab, then?" says Fisk, that smug little bastard. "You burned their place of work to the *ground*, all because Barbara Holland died."

"*Bullshit*," Nancy spits as she gets to her feet, glaring at Fisk with undisguised hatred. "They were covering up her death! You're gunning after a man because you hate that someone had the guts to stand up and call you out on the sheer goddamn bullshit you're spewing, and to make sure you faced justice!"

"There is no such thing!" Fisk roars, his voice echoing off the walls of the cell. Jonathan staggers to his feet to stand his ground—he should be more scared, he thinks, but after monsters like the Demogorgon,

after the demodog in the fridge, he's not all that terrified of Fisk, himself.

But the things Fisk could do to Dustin, the things he's been willing to do to the loved ones of the people who wronged him—that's what scares Jonathan more.

"There is no such thing as justice," snarls Fisk, his eyes burning with a fervent fury, "for I am *here*."

Notes for the Chapter:

man I v much hope someone gives Steve Harrington and Foggy Nelson hugs after this.

6. i can't see new york from the other side

Summary for the Chapter:

It's silent. Too silent. New York is never this quiet, ever. Something has gone terribly wrong.

"What the hell?" says Danny, alarmed. "Where are all the people?"

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Tori Amos' "I Can't See New York". (considering Luke and Danny's situation, and Foggy's mourning Matt, this is doubly appropriate.)

upside down.

Luke wakes up, and the first thing he registers is that they're not in that alleyway anymore. The second is that they're on the other side of it, and he marvels at how they've somehow managed to find a shortcut from one street to the other.

The third is that they are not in Harlem anymore. Not one he knows, at any rate, because when he pushes himself up off of Danny to look around, he blinks.

It's silent. *Too* silent. New York is never this quiet, ever. Something has gone terribly wrong.

"What the hell?" says Danny, alarmed. "Where are all the people?"

"Not here," says Luke, pulling Danny up. When he looks back behind him, the wound's closed up, the only trace it was ever there a rapidly-fading scab. "Wherever here is. One thing's for sure, though—we might be stuck here."

Danny's eyes widen, and he whips around to see the scab closing up. "No," he whispers, "no, no, *no*—"

And he all but *flies* toward it, slamming the Iron Fist into the scar. For

half a heartbeat, Luke's hope soars in his chest, like an eagle in flight. Maybe, just *maybe*—

The wall collapses, but instead of the way back home, all Luke sees is an empty, dark alleyway, covered in vines and god knows what else. Hope crashes right into the ground at top speed.

Danny screams, and staggers back. Luke rushes to his side before he can collapse fully.

"The hell is going on here?" he says.

"I don't—*know*," Danny starts, dazedly. His fist's glow flickers and fades, until it's just a normal handk. "Something's wrong with the chi of this place. It's—I'm not sure how to describe it."

"Try," says Luke, hauling him up. Danny's tired, he realizes, he's leaning much more heavily on Luke than he'd usually allow himself. That one punch must've drained him of whatever mojo powers his Fist.

"It's like," Danny starts, then pauses. He huffs out a breath, shakes his now normal hand out. "It's like Harlem," he says. "Except everything's backwards and wrong. Energy doesn't flow the way it's supposed to—it's like suddenly the river's going the opposite direction from where it's supposed to go."

"Let me guess, it's screwing with your magic fist," says Luke.

"Iron Fist," Danny corrects. "And yes. That's what it's doing."

"Sweet Christmas," Luke grumbles under his breath. "You okay, Danny?"

"We're stuck in a completely different plane that's somehow a lot like ours," says Danny, contemplatively. "It's a little like K'un-Lun, only with a lot less people and with a lot more, uh, whatever those are." He waves a hand at the vines, creeping up the walls.

Luke's stomach churns. It's *jarring*, looking around this not-Harlem and seeing all these familiar places, these old houses and walls with people he's become so fond of, and seeing *nothing* but vines and

weird flowers and whatever else is in this other plane.

He pauses, then looks at Danny. “Other plane?” he says.

“I got lessons in K’un-Lun about places like it,” Danny explains. “Mystical and holy sites, hidden away from unworthy eyes with magic, accessible only through a special gate. They’re sort of—*outside* the world, but at the same time they’re tied into it.”

“Place don’t seem that mystical and holy to me,” Luke observes, as the two of them walk out of the alleyway once more. When they step outside, he has to stop in his tracks. “*Definitely* not,” he says, staring at the vines creeping up buildings, the glowing flowers blooming in dark places, the—oh, ew, that’s the remnants of an egg, isn’t it?

“Yeah, in retrospect,” says Danny, “I think the monks might’ve left something out.” He pauses, then adds sourly, “*Again.*”

“You got out of K’un-Lun,” Luke points out, half-carrying Danny’s skinny ass to a porch that’s barely covered in weird vines.

“After ten years,” Danny says, as Luke deposits him on the steps. He prods one of the vines a little too much and makes a face when it starts to ooze. “Oh, ew.”

Yeah, these aren’t vines. It’s like they’re *veins*, and boy is Luke going to get sick just thinking about it. “This isn’t K’un-Lun,” he says. “Maybe that wasn’t the only portal. Maybe there’s others, scattered around the city. Maybe—”

A shrill shriek cuts through the air. Something about it hits all of Luke’s primal instincts of *getting the fuck out of here*.

“We need to run,” says Danny. “That didn’t sound friendly at *all*.”

“Don’t have to tell *me*,” says Luke, hauling him up. “Can you keep up?”

Danny scoffs. “Yeah, of course,” he says, and then proceeds to almost collapse onto Luke.

“Yeah, I’m carrying you,” says Luke.

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promise? promise.

Nancy gave Mike a key to her apartment when she and her then-boyfriends moved to New York.

It had been an early Christmas gift—their parents’ divorce was dragging on and on, their arguments getting uglier and uglier, and Mike had just wanted a place to get away for a little while. Nancy, who’d decided to follow Jonathan out to New York to pursue a career in journalism, had come back home before the holidays and handed him two identical keys, wrapped in bows.

“If you or Holly ever need a place to stay,” she’d said, “our door’s open, and Jonathan’s teaching Steve how to make blueberry pancakes.”

He came with Holly and El and the rest of the Party to New York, just a few days after that. Dustin, he remembers, had been downright enchanted by the place, and afterwards had joked that one day he’d follow Jonathan out to NYU, maybe take a biology course or go into medical school.

And now here’s Mike, rattling around the empty Wheeler-Harrington-Byers apartment, trying to call his sister again. Every time he tries, all he gets is her voicemail: *this is Nancy Wheeler speaking, leave a message if it’s urgent*. Clipped and professional-like.

Funny, how what used to be his safe place is now the one filled with ghosts.

“Don’t,” he says to himself, out loud. Nancy’s fine, she’s got to be. She’s a reporter, and she can take care of herself. So can Jonathan, he’s her regular photographer, and when they team up they’re terrifying.

Steve, too. Even if historically Steve has not had the greatest luck in fistfights.

They aren’t ghosts, not yet. And Will had been gone a week, El almost a whole *year*. They’ll be fine. They’ll be fine.

They have to be.

The doorbell rings, and Mike startles so badly he falls off the couch. "I'm coming!" he yells, and scrambles to his feet. He catches sight of himself in the mirror and winces a little—he looks like shit.

He races to the door and yanks it open.

"El!" he exclaims, and he wraps his wife up in a hug, spins her around. "El, oh my god—"

"Hi, Mike," says El, and she kisses him.

"Okay," comes a familiar voice, "break it up, you two, we've still got to find Will."

Mike breaks away from El, turns to see Dustin. For once he's out of his suit and tie, dressed down in a jacket, button-down shirt and pants. "*Dustin?*" he says, incredulously. "I thought you'd be at work."

"It's my day off," says Dustin. "I was going to use it to look for Steve, but then Jane said something about a Daredevil copycat kidnapping Will."

"Wait, it's not *really* Daredevil?" says Mike, and Dustin looks away then, jaw tightening as he sticks his hands in his pockets. "Dustin? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," says Dustin, and it's such a bald-faced lie that Mike gapes at him in shock. He turns to El, and sees her give a small shake of her head. *Let him have this secret*, she doesn't say, but she doesn't need to. They've been married for long enough.

"If you're sure," says Mike, making a note anyway to press later. Whatever's got Dustin so worn-down, whatever he's grieving, it's got something to do with Daredevil. "How do you know he's a fake, anyway?" he asks as they step out into the corridor, the door shutting behind them.

"Daredevil died six months ago, that's how I know whoever's got Will is a fake," says Dustin, curtly enough that Mike decides not to ask any more questions. He leads them down the rest of the stairs in

silence. “He’s near the docks in Hell’s Kitchen,” he says to El, once they’ve stepped out of the building, “right?”

“Yes,” El confirms. “In an empty apartment—condemned, I think.”

“Well, that narrows it down nicely,” says Dustin, slightly more cheery now. “There’s not a lot of condemned buildings left near the docks in Hell’s Kitchen, what with the gentrification and all. I know where we can start.”

Then Mike says, “Aren’t we going to take a cab?”

“In this city?” says Dustin, incredulously, turning to look at Mike as if he’s grown a second head. “Walking’ll get us there faster than a cab will, trust me. Should just take us,” he pulls his sleeve down, and says, “an hour tops. If we walk fast we can cut it down to 45 minutes.”

“Then we better walk fast,” says Mike, setting off.

El grabs hold of his arm, dragging him back. “It’s the *other way*,” she says, with conviction.

“How many times have you been to New York again?” says Dustin, taking the lead once more.

Mike, in answer, punches his shoulder. Dustin huffs out a laugh, nudges him back, and for a little while it’s like he never drifted away from them. Mike’s missed this.

Mike’s missed his friend so much.

He just wishes he knows what the hell is Dustin trying to keep secret.

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blind man's burden.

“There,” says Byers, placing a bandage over the wound, “done.”

Matt tugs his shirt back down, hisses a little at the spike of pain as fabric slides over the bandage, but otherwise he’s—a little bit better

now, maybe. Less likely to bleed out all over the place, which is always good. “Thanks,” he says, gruffly.

“Don’t mention it,” says Byers. He sounds more alert now, and Matt can smell the faded scent of ink and paper on him now, the chloroform’s mostly dissipated. Foggy had told him that Will Byers was an artist, hadn’t he? But he hadn’t said Will Byers knew how to stitch someone up, which is a little bit concerning, to say the least.

Then again, Matt’s known how to stitch someone’s wound closed since he was nine years old. He’s not exactly qualified to throw stones here.

“You really don’t have anyone who can help you out with that?” says Byers, snapping Matt out of his thoughts.

Matt shrugs. “Cons of being a vigilante,” he says, wry, “it’s not easy to find someone willing to perform first aid on you.” He could find Claire, sure, but—he’s brought her enough trouble. He’s brought everyone he loves enough trouble, maybe it’s best if he stays away, this time. “I’m surprised you are,” he adds.

“The funny thing is,” says Byers, “I’m not actually the first one to have learned. My old babysitter used to get beat up defending us, so my friend Dustin got my stepdad to teach him first aid.”

Dustin.

Foggy.

Foggy had never told him about that. Hadn’t said much about his life in Hawkins, outside of funny little anecdotes and nostalgic mentions of the friends he left behind there. Matt had certainly never heard anything about Foggy picking up first aid there.

He wonders *why*. There’s something Byers isn’t telling him, he’s sure, but so far his heartbeat hasn’t changed a tick.

“But you’re the best,” says Matt.

“Mostly ‘cause Jonathan would get pretty banged up too, sometimes,” says Byers. “Sometimes defending me, other times because someone

started talking shit about Nancy and Steve—that last part went way up after someone saw all three of them.” He gives a soft, sad little sigh. “One time Dustin had to patch *me* up, though.”

“What happened?” Matt asks, despite himself. This man knows Foggy, or *knew* him, once, and Matt can deny himself a lot of things, but he can’t lie to himself—he misses Foggy, like he’d miss a limb. Like he misses the sky.

“I stepped on a bear trap by accident,” says Byers, and his heartbeat ticks upwards. *Lie*. “Dumb, right? I mean, when you live in a town that’s mostly known for hunting, you should know how to not step in traps, even if you don’t hunt.” He laughs, self-deprecating, but Matt hears the lie underneath it. *Thudthud, thudthud*.

Why would Byers lie about stepping in a bear trap?

Matt’s about to say something about how likely it is that someone could accidentally trigger a bear trap when he hears voices, two blocks away. One of them familiar.

“Did you call someone over?” he asks, thinking of the conversation Byers cut short when he came in. He’d heard him talking to—well, nothing, and he’d just *assumed*—shit.

“Oh,” says Byers. “Yeah, I—talked to my sister Jane. She’s probably bringing her husband with her right now.” He chuckles a little, a hand running through his hair. “You can trust them, don’t worry. Jane’s good at keeping secrets, and so’s Mike.”

He’s sure they probably are, but that faint voice in the distance grows louder as it closes in.

Foggy. He’d know Foggy’s voice anywhere. Sitting stock-still, he cocks his head to listen further, but can’t make out a lot more beyond *Midland Circle* and *dead*.

Oh, god, this was a huge mistake. He should’ve left Will Byers alone while he was still semi-conscious from the chloroform and not accepted his help, *fuck*. Foggy can’t find out he’s alive, not like this—preferably not at *all*, Matt’s brought him enough pain.

But, oh, god, he's missed the sound of his voice. Critical seconds pass before he realizes he's got to *move* before Foggy finds him.

"I need to go," he says, getting to his feet and letting out a pained hiss. Right. Knife wound.

"What?" says Byers, startling out of the mattress. "No! I *just* patched you back up, you can't just *go*—" He staggers, curses under his breath.

"And I appreciate the help, I really do," says Matt, backing up towards the window, "but I can't stay. The people I go up against, they'll *kill* you if they see you with me."

"*But—*"

"I'll keep an eye out for your brother," he promises, aware of the irony even as the words leave his mouth. "Just stay *safe*." He hesitates just before he climbs out onto the fire escape, and says, "And—tell your friend that, too."

Foggy's footsteps, speeding up. Byers' hand, reaching for him.

Matt leaps off.

"*Daredevil!*"

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almost.

Foggy races to the window and clambers out onto the fire escape, swearing up and down as he all but collapses onto the metal grating.

Then he gets to his feet, and looks around.

Nothing. Not even a trace he was ever there.

"God-fucking-*dammit*," Foggy snaps out, kicking angrily at the ladder. It breaks off from how rusted the hinges have become over the years, crashing to the ground. "Um. I didn't do that."

“Do what,” says Jane, leaning out.

“Thanks,” says Foggy. “*Fuck*.” He turns to Will and says, “Will! Holy shit—did he hurt you?”

“Uh, no,” says Will. “He saved my life.”

“He could’ve been doing it for sinister reasons!” says Foggy. “Mike! Back me up here.”

“Can’t really argue with *he saved my life*, though,” says Mike, crossing his arms. “You okay, Will?”

Will huffs out a breath, runs his hand through his hair. “I’m fine,” he says. “I’m probably doing better than Daredevil. I had to patch him back up.”

“That wasn’t Daredevil,” says Foggy, leaning on the railing, trying to get his breathing back under control. As far as Will, Jane and Mike are concerned, he doesn’t know who Daredevil is. He shouldn’t be this fucked up about a copycat running around. He *shouldn’t*.

Except he is.

“He’s *dead*,” he says to Will, turning around. “It’s a copycat, and I have to—fuck, I’ve got to tell Karen. She was closer to him than I was, she’s always been a lot more sympathetic to vigilantes.”

“Who?” says Jane.

“Wait,” says Mike, “you know *Karen Page*? The woman who wrote about the Punisher?”

Foggy turns to him and says, “Wait, you know her?”

“Not personally,” says Mike, and Foggy’s just about to chalk it up to just name recognition, she did write about the Punisher, after all, when he adds, “but Nancy’s talked about her. They’re good friends, they meet for coffee with that Trish Walker lady every other Tuesday.”

“Oh,” says Foggy, distantly. He hadn’t known that. He hadn’t—*talked*

to Karen a lot, they had barely really spoken with each other since Matt died. How long have she and Nancy and Trish been meeting up? How did he miss something so important?

What has he been doing that he missed that and Steve going *missing*?

“Something up?” says Will.

“I’ve been a shitty friend,” says Foggy, fixing his jacket up. “And I need to go apologize to someone before I give them some very, very bad news.”

7. ask yourself, where do we go

Summary for the Chapter:

“Do you just know everyone in New York?” says Max, straightening up and coming up behind her husband. “Is that something that happens when you’re a nurse?”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Missing Persons' "Destination Unknown".

coffee appointments.

It started with just her and Trish, is the thing. The two of them had run into each other at a Starbucks in Queens, Karen tracking down a lead and Trish—well, doing much the same thing, actually. One thing led to another and they ended up hanging out over coffee, comparing notes and talking shit about their coworkers.

Nancy came later. She'd swung by a local café, just as Trish and Karen happened to have their coffee together, and one thing led to another and eventually it just became Their Thing—unspoken, unwritten, but agreed on by all parties.

It had been nice, to have something solid to fall back on when she needed it. With Matt—gone, and Foggy up to his ears in his cases in an attempt to not think about it, Karen had felt horribly alone. Meeting up with Trish and Nancy had become a safety net, of sorts, and even with the secrets they were keeping from each other—the things she and Trish were keeping from Nancy, in truth—Karen had grown to like their coffee appointments.

She's a little surprised, therefore, when she gets to the café to find just Trish already there. Usually Nancy's made it there first, sometimes with one of her husbands in tow.

“Hey, Trish,” she says, taking a seat across from Trish, and throwing a glance at the empty chair. “Where's Nancy?”

“Knowing her, she's probably tracking down a lead somewhere,” says

Trish, with a shrug. “How’s work?”

“I’m covering the Miller scandal,” says Karen, sighing.

Trish groans theatrically. “Oh, god, *that*,” she says. “I swear to god, some of the callers I get about that are so—so—”

“Douchey,” says Karen. “The word you’re looking for is *douchey*.”

“Yes, exactly!” Trish exclaims, turning to the empty chair for a brief moment. “Speaking of callers, though—I got a pet off one of them, for some reason.”

“Seriously?” says Karen. “That’s—wow, that is weird. What is it?”

“I have *no* idea,” says Trish. “Probably a reptile they wanted to get rid of. It’s in Jessica’s apartment right now gorging itself on chocolate, of all things.”

“Reptiles don’t eat chocolate,” Karen points out. “Maybe I can swing by and take a look at—what’s its name?”

“Nougat,” says Trish. “Don’t look at me like that, it wasn’t my idea.”

“Who names a reptile *Nougat*?” says Karen.

“Same person who’d name their dog *Butter*, I’d bet,” Foggy says behind her, and Karen startles out of her chair, whips around with her hand sliding into her bag before she catches sight of him, holding his hands up. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Karen, it’s me.”

“You *asshole*,” says Karen, pulling him into a hug. Foggy laughs, and hugs her back. “We’ve barely talked in months! What have you been *doing*?”

“Drowning in depositions,” says Foggy. It’s not even a good lie, she knows Foggy too well to discount the possibility that he purposely tried to drown himself in depositions. It’s either that or alcohol, and at a law firm like Hogarth, Chao & Benowitz, the latter is likely to get him suspended if it interferes with his work. “I am so, so sorry, Karen. I’ve been a bad friend.”

"I've had worse friends," says Karen. "Come on, pull up a seat. There's someone I'd like you to meet, she should be coming by—"

"Nancy Wheeler?" says Foggy, and Karen stops short.

"You know Nancy?" says Trish, who hasn't gotten up from her seat. "New York's smaller than I thought it was."

"Yeah, she's from my hometown," says Foggy. "Hawkins, Indiana. Tiny-ass little town famous for hunting."

Hawkins—it's a vaguely familiar name, but Karen can't quite remember where she could've heard it before. "How'd you know we were meeting up with each other?" she says. "We haven't talked, unless you keep in touch with all your old hometown friends."

"Not a lot, no," Foggy admits. "I only found out this morning from Nancy's brother Mike."

"The screenwriter?" says Trish. "He and Jane are in town? And why would he tell you?"

Foggy breathes out. Then he pulls up a chair and slumps into it, the way Karen's seen him do when he's had a very, very long day. Dread ties her stomach into knots, and she doesn't sit down, not quite yet.

He says, "Nancy's gone missing. Steve and Jonathan, too."

"Oh, god," says Trish, eyes going wide. "Oh, god."

Karen straightens up and says, "When did they go missing?"

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the nurse and the dragon.

"Luke Cage speaking. Leave a message if it's urgent."

Claire sighs, walking down the street. "Luke," she says, "where are you? I've been calling you for hours. Pick up, please." She ends the message there, stuffs her phone into her pocket, and kicks a rock down the sidewalk.

Five hours. *Five hours.* She knows she shouldn't feel worried, Luke can more than take care of himself (and he's got Danny and his glowing fist with him), but that doesn't change the fact that anxiety's sunk its cold thin claws into her lungs, its grip so tight she can hardly breathe for it.

Five hours, and he hasn't picked up his phone.

She thinks of Matt, unwillingly—six months dead and gone, dying the way she knew he would. It breaks her heart to remember the sight of the building collapsing, the rubble afterwards.

Luke can take care of himself. More than, in fact. But she still can't help but remember the collapse, that awful sound of the building caving in on itself. In most of her nightmares Luke's still trapped down there when it all falls down. In some of them it's Jessica, or Danny. There's a few where no one gets out, not even her.

Blowing up a building that then kills a good friend is the kind of thing that weighs heavy on a girl. Who knew?

She stops at Colleen's dojo. It's likely Danny's inside, he and Colleen practically live in each other's pockets. And if Danny's in, maybe Luke is too.

She's grasping at straws here, but there's nothing else to hold onto. She climbs up the stairs, lets muscle memory take over until she's slipping off her shoes at the door and stepping inside, letting the under-10 students stream out.

"Hey, Claire," says Colleen.

And—

Lucas Sinclair is gaping at her, in shock. His wife Max is leaning against one of the pillars of the dojo, and she says, cheerfully, "Damn, Claire, do you just know everyone now?"

"I'm starting to think I do," says Claire. "Hi, Colleen. What's going on here?"

"They're looking for one of my students," says Colleen, lips pressed

together into a thin line. She turns back to them and says, “The last time I saw Steve was just a few days ago. We sparred, I put him flat on his back.”

“Was he acting weird in any way?” says Lucas.

“Define *weird*,” says Colleen, wryly, “because around here, that’s something of a relative term.”

“Weird like *out of character*,” says Max.

“Weird like, did he ask you anything that might’ve seemed strange or out of the blue to you?” says Lucas.

“Not really, no,” says Colleen. “His husband, when he swung by, though—he did seem more withdrawn than usual, he didn’t seem keen on talking about his latest photos. I didn’t even know it was possible.”

That’s a surprise by itself. Going off of what little Claire knows of Jonathan Byers, and what she knows of newspaper people in general, they like talking about how they caught this picture, how they snagged this story.

That is, *after* the story’s out.

The Trainer story’s still in progress. She wonders if someone made sure it would stay that way.

“—knew Colleen,” Lucas is saying, and Claire realizes that she’s zoned out. Shit, between Luke disappearing and Lucas and Max’s ongoing search for their babysitter and his spouses, she’s not at her best. “Claire?”

“Sorry,” says Claire, rubbing at her eyes. “What was that again? About Colleen?”

“I didn’t know you knew Colleen,” says Lucas.

“Do you just know everyone in New York?” says Max, straightening up and coming up behind her husband. “Is that something that happens when you’re a nurse? Lucas?”

"I already knew most people in Hawkins before I went into nursing, Max," says Lucas.

"Yeah, I know Colleen," says Claire. "She taught me a few of her tricks. I'm sure Steve's going to be fine, if she's been teaching him."

"I *wish*," says Max. "He keeps getting beaten up."

"Because he lacks the proper form," says Colleen. "He telegraphs all his punches. Tell him that when you find him, all right? Every time I put him on his back I want to cry a little bit."

"We will," Lucas says, with an amused laugh as Max shifts over to his side, her arm snaking around his waist. Claire looks away from the easy affection in front of her—Luke is still missing, and the comfortable manner in which Lucas and Max move around each other makes her heart hurt in ways she hadn't expected. "Come on, Max. Let's go see Dustin."

"About damn time," Max mutters as they walk out of the dojo, attached to each other's side. "It's been *years*. You'd think he'd keep in touch more often."

Claire watches them go, pitying this poor Dustin guy. Then she turns to Colleen and says, "Have you seen Danny?"

Colleen frowns. "I thought he and Luke went out," she says.

"They did," Claire confirms. "They haven't come back yet." She tucks her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "I've tried calling Luke's phone, but I keep getting his voicemail. I must've left a hundred messages just trying to get to him. Have you tried Danny's?"

"I did," says Colleen. "He didn't pick up. At first I thought it was just, well, *Danny*. His luck with phones is pretty bad."

Claire chuckles. Yeah, Danny's never been able to keep a phone from getting irreparably damaged for more than a month, tops. "So what tipped you off?" she asks.

"You, just now," says Colleen. "If Danny was with Luke, you'd know where they are."

“But I don’t,” says Claire.

“But you don’t,” says Colleen, depositing the wooden sword and taking up her sheathed katana. She slides it into her belt, with practiced ease. “Weird disappearances have been going around lately. I am *not* going to have Danny and Luke become statistics, the way Steve is now.”

“How weird?” says Claire, as Colleen ducks into her bedroom and comes out with a duffel bag.

“I don’t know for sure,” says Colleen. “All I know is: whatever happened to Steve? I’m not going to let it happen to Danny and Luke. I *won’t*.”

“So you’re going to go after them with just me in tow,” says Claire, following after her as they step outside of the dojo.

“That’s the plan,” says Colleen. “If you’ve got a better one, I’d love to hear it.”

“Actually,” says Claire as they step out into the late afternoon of New York City, “I do. But first—we may need to pool our money.”

Colleen stops in place, turns to stare at her in shock once what Claire’s said seems to sink in. “*Jessica Jones?*” she says, incredulous. Right. Jessica’s a good person at heart, but she’s also such an *asshole* that Claire continually marvels at it.

But damn, if she isn’t good at her job.

“She’s very good at finding,” says Claire.

8. you're gonna catch hell

Summary for the Chapter:

"You sound like Matt," says Karen. "Yes, of course I'll be careful."

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from The White Stripes' "Catch Hell Blues".

aka five hours.

"Where the *fuck* is the Bendis file?!"

"Try the top drawer in your desk," says Malcolm, sprinkling bits of chocolate into the terrarium where Nougat the reptile-pollywog-slimy slug-whatever is happily napping in a cold, sunless hellscape.

Jessica may be a little bit jealous of Nougat right now.

She yanks her top drawer open, sifts through the files she inelegantly stuffed into it until she finds *BENDIS*, scrawled in her own shitty handwriting. "I got it," she says, putting the file down on her desk and opening it up to add more pictures of Bendis' little *affairs*. "You'd think this guy would vary his routes a little," she mutters. "Dumbass."

"Bendis is that old guy, right?" says Malcolm, petting the slimy little thing. It makes a shrill noise that could probably be called purring, if it came from a cat and not whatever the fuck Nougat is. "He's very set in his ways."

Jessica sighs, and slumps into her seat. "Figured out what your pet is yet?" she says.

"He just might be a new species," says Malcolm, wiping his hand off on his pants and sitting down in one of her chairs. "We could call it *Jonesius pollywogus*."

"You do that and I'll stick that thing in your apartment so you can

explain to the super how you ended up with a cat *and* whatever that thing is,” says Jessica.

Malcolm laughs, holds his hands up. “Okay, okay,” he says. “I have no idea what he is, though, really. Google hasn’t told me anything.”

“Take him to someone who’s qualified, then,” says Jessica. “Some scientist or whatever.”

“You know any scientists who can identify Nougat?” says Malcolm, and tou-fucking-ché there. Jessica sighs, and her fingers twitch briefly towards her flask. “Also, you really need to buy actual food.”

“I buy food,” says Jessica.

“You bought *potato chips*,” says Malcolm.

“They’re made from potatoes,” says Jessica, and even she has to admit it sounds like an excuse. A shitty, shitty excuse.

Malcolm’s about to open his mouth to argue back when the door opens. Claire steps inside, with Colleen in tow—Colleen and her sword, sheathed.

“Jess, hey,” Claire starts, before she catches sight of Nougat. “What the hell is that?”

Malcolm tenses a little at the sight of the sword. Jessica stands up and moves closer. She knows Colleen wouldn’t unsheathe it and point it at Malcolm, or anyone else, but she says, “There’s a coat rack, Wing, hang the sword there.”

Colleen gives her an odd look, but she hangs the sword on the coat rack anyway. “Have you seen Danny?” she says.

Jessica points at Nougat. “Its name is Nougat,” she says.

“He’s pretty fond of it,” Malcolm offers.

Jessica points at Colleen. “And no, I haven’t, because I have literally no reason to talk to Richie Rich,” she says. “Working together with him once does not mean I’m buddies with him.”

“Have you seen Luke, then?” says Claire, and that’s a punch to the gut.

“I haven’t,” says Jessica, leaning against her desk. “Is something going on?”

“Luke and Danny are missing,” says Claire, and Jessica has to sit down in the chair across from Malcolm, because her legs refuse to support her anymore. Missing. *Missing*.

“How long?” she asks.

“Five hours,” says Colleen.

“What were they doing?” says Jessica. Usually she’d do some prep before tracking them down, but she knows Luke and Danny. Five hours missing? They’re probably in trouble.

She looks at Malcolm, and nods. He skedaddles, going to the kitchen to get some food.

“Looking for someone else,” says Claire, “most likely.” She worries at her lower lip with her teeth, tucks some strands of hair behind her ear. “Have you talked to Lucas and Max Sinclair? They asked me and Luke to keep an eye out for—someone they knew, and I was going to talk to Luke about them.”

“Who’s this someone?” says Jessica.

“One of my students,” says Colleen. “Steve Harrington.”

“Jonathan’s Steve Harrington?” Malcolm says, coming back into the office with some salads sent from Trish’s place. “He’s missing?”

“Along with Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers, yeah,” says Claire, glancing briefly at Malcolm, surprise written all over her face. “Lucas said Nancy and Jonathan were tracking down some leads for their story, and then just—poof.” She snaps her fingers. “Gone.”

“Shit,” says Malcolm, putting the salads down. “I know Jonathan.”

“Why would Steve go missing too if it was just Nancy and Jonathan

tracking down leads?” says Colleen.

“They’re married,” says Malcolm.

“All *three*?” says Jessica, incredulous.

“Just Jonathan and Nancy, legally,” says Malcolm, “but Jonathan calls Steve his husband, so.”

“Kinky,” Jessica mutters. “Anyway, besides that—I have to ask this, but did you try the police? Knight and Mahoney are still there, and they’re as trustworthy as you can get.” As inauspicious as their first meeting was—all right, fine, as generally antagonistic as their first meeting was, Misty Knight’s a good cop. Jessica can trust her to do her job, at least.

“You really wanna go to Misty about this when she’s already in hot water?” says Claire, raising an eyebrow. “Or Brett?”

Jessica sighs. Goddammit.

“Fine,” she says. “Give me fifty dollars.”

Colleen blinks at her. “Fifty dollars?” she asks, floored.

“I lost my MetroCard,” says Jessica.

She walks out of her office with Claire and Colleen tagging along, and sixty dollars in her pocket.

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small town.

“So you’re saying, on top of Nancy going missing, there’s now a Daredevil copycat running around.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” says Foggy, as he and Karen walk down the street back to the *Bulletin* office. Trish is long gone, having gone back to the radio station to host a special episode of Trish Talk. Matt is—

Foggy swallows back the lump in his throat.

"Will said he saved his life," he says.

"You don't sound so sure," says Karen.

"He did save his life," says Foggy. "I'm just not sure what for. I'm not even sure why someone would pick up the Daredevil mantle, right out of nowhere, six months after he was last seen." Maybe the new guy's some kind of super-fan. *Deranged* super-fan.

"You don't think it could be—"

"No," says Foggy. "It couldn't be."

They walk on in silence, Karen's heels clicking on the pavement. This used to be easier.

He chalks it up to Midland Circle once more.

Karen says, quiet, "We don't talk anymore."

I've been busy, he'd say to anybody else, but Foggy's got the feeling Karen would immediately call him out on that. Yes, he's been busy, but he's been drowning himself in work on purpose. Instead he says, "I know. I'm sorry." He sighs, runs a hand through his hair. "I've been a shitty friend, I pushed you out when you needed me."

"Yeah, you have," says Karen, sighing. "You're making up for it now, at least. The circumstances could be so much better."

"Your old friend from the small town you grew up in is missing under suspicious circumstances and so are his spouses is, I'll admit, the worst situation to try and make up for being an asshole," says Foggy. He tucks his hands into his pockets as they stop at a stoplight, letting the cars pass them by.

"I thought you were born and raised here," says Karen.

"I was born in a hospital here," says Foggy. "Raised is—tough. My parents moved a lot until my dad died, and then my mom settled in Hawkins when I was in fourth grade. And then she remarried and I

came back here.” He looks up at the sky and breathes in the New York air, breathes out. “I guess I was always destined to end up in New York, one way or another.”

“Hawkins, Indiana?” says Karen, the light of recognition in her eyes.

“Yep,” says Foggy. “And before you ask, yeah, I was there when the Hawkins Lab scandal broke. It was the most excitement the place ever had since Patrick McNamara jumped off a cliff on a dare and ended up in a hospital for a week.”

It’s not entirely a lie. He just—leaves out the part with the monsters, the Upside Down, Eleven, Dr. Brenner.

“Nancy was there too,” he adds. “She got her start in journalism because of that scandal. Apparently she and Jonathan sent a taped confession about the DOE covering up some really bad shit to all the biggest papers in the country, and things went from there.”

Karen whistles, and says, “*Damn*. You have to introduce me to all of your friends from Hawkins.”

“It’s not *that* interesting,” says Foggy, with a laugh, as they step out onto the crosswalk. This lie, he’s practiced so much he can almost believe it himself, if it weren’t for the nightmares. “I mean, besides the lab, it’s famous for hunting, really good waffles, and also good old-fashioned *traditional values*.”

“No wonder Nancy left,” Karen says, as they walk up to the entrance of the *Bulletin*. “Hey, Foggy?”

“I’ll let you know if we hear anything from Nancy, Steve or Jonathan,” Foggy promises.

“That’s not what I was going to ask,” says Karen, a hand on the door, ready to push it open. “You know you can talk to me, right? You don’t have to do this alone. You shouldn’t have to.”

“I know,” says Foggy. “And I will. So much more often, in fact.”

“Should I get that in writing?” says Karen.

“Nah, I can remember this one,” says Foggy. “Oh, and, uh—there was something Nancy and Jonathan were looking into, before they disappeared.”

Karen hoists her bag further up onto her shoulder. “The Trainer story, yeah,” she says. “She was a little cagey about the details. Isn’t she one of HCB’s clients?”

“Fisk is involved in it,” says Foggy, and Karen goes utterly, horribly still. “I don’t know how, seeing as when I last checked he was in prison, but they were tracking a lead that went to him.”

“How’d they even find the lead?” Karen says. “When we were trying to dig him up, all of ours were conveniently missing.”

“That’s what I don’t know,” Foggy admits. “But I’ve got a feeling however they did it, it’s gotten his and Trainer’s attention. In a *bad* way.”

Karen shifts her weight onto her right foot, scuffs the pavement with the toe of her shoe. “So what do you plan to do?” she says, looking up at him. There’s a glint in her eye that says she can smell a story here, says she can hear the truth underneath his words.

“I plan to keep looking,” says Foggy. “I’m pretty sure you want to start looking too. But we’ve got to be careful about this—we draw too much attention on us, we might personally find out what happened to Nancy ‘cause they’ll do it to us.”

“You sound like Matt,” says Karen. “Yes, of course I’ll be careful.”

He really kind of doubts she will be. “Yeah, well,” he says, trying to summon a smile up from somewhere, “he was my business partner for a while. Maybe he kinda rubbed off on me.”

“A lot more than you think,” Karen says. She steps closer, and wraps her arms around him, presses him close to her in a hug.

He goes still, for a second, out of practice. Then he hugs her back.

“I missed you,” she says, “*so much*.” She steps away, and pushes the door open. “Keep in touch, Foggy,” she says, and steps inside the

offices.

“I will,” says Foggy.

His phone rings. He pulls it out and sighs, when he sees the caller ID—what would Jeri Hogarth be doing calling him on his day off? Jesus.

He slides his thumb across the screen and says, in his peppiest voice, “What can I do for the firm of Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz?”

“For starters,” says Hogarth, in a tone brooking no arguments, *“you can come down here and explain to me a few things that I, apparently, missed when I hired you.”*

“Like what?” says Foggy.

“Like Daredevil.”

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breaking.

Steve wakes up.

“Steve!” Nancy. That’s Nancy. Oh, thank fucking god, it’s *Nancy*. He all but drags her down into a hug, and she makes a high little *oof* noise, the kind he loves so much. “You’re all right—”

“What did she do with you, Harrington?” says Jonathan, scooting over to help him up. Steve squints up at him, his vision swimming from the drugs working their way through his system. Something about—combinations, activating psychic abilities, or whatever.

Steve’s pretty sure he’s about as psychic as a rock.

“I swear to god if she’s hurt you, I will literally burn this whole facility to the ground.” Nancy, again. He wonders if he just missed her mouth moving, or something. He grabs her shoulder.

“Don’t,” he pleads, quietly, thinking of Trainer’s soft voice, threatening: *I know who your charges are. I know how to ruin them.*

Especially her. Especially her. “I’m fine, Nance, I’m fine.”

Nancy blinks at him, oddly. “I didn’t say anything,” she says.

“You said you were going to burn down this place,” he says. He looks to Jonathan, who frowns and shakes his head.

“Good idea, though,” Jonathan adds—seems to add—what the hell? “Burning this whole place down—oh shit, no, Steve’s swaying—”

Steve sways on his feet once more. Nancy catches him, Jonathan hauls him up and lets him lean on him. “You can’t,” Steve says, “she knows about El, and the rest. About Kali. She *knows*.”

“How?” Nancy demands.

“Said her uncle was in charge of the whole mess,” Steve mumbles. “Said her dad died because of El. Said a lot of weird stuff, but she *knows*, she and the big guy—”

“Fisk,” Jonathan supplies.

“Fuck,” says Steve. Dustin, shit, *Dustin*—he’d been one half of the firm that took down Fisk once and for all. Oh, god. Oh, Jesus Christ. “He wants to go after Dustin,” he says, the horror sinking in.

“We know,” says Jonathan. “He wants to blackmail him. We’re going to get you out, and then we’re going to find Dustin—”

“No, no, *no*,” says Steve, clutching at Jonathan’s dirty shirt. His vision’s going to shit, and the darkness is creeping in at the edges, but he has to tell them what he’s found out. “He doesn’t want to blackmail Dustin. He wants—”

He coughs.

“He wants to drag him down into hell,” he says. “That’s what he said. What kinda dramatic-ass bullshit it is, I don’t know, but he doesn’t want to *blackmail* Dustin, it wouldn’t work anyway. He wants to *break* him, he wants...he wants—”

He shuts his eyes and almost topples over into Jonathan.

“Steve!” Nancy again, catching him. “Steve, come on, don’t—don’t do this to us, stay awake, please—”

“I’m trying,” Steve mumbles, but it’s no use—his eyes slip closed, and in no time at all, he’s drifting into the darkness of sleep.

9. guess my race is run

Summary for the Chapter:

“Mike? Lucas? What are you doing here?”

“Could ask you the same thing,” says Lucas. “What happened, Dustin?”

“We came to talk to you,” says Mike. “What’s going on here? It’s not—”

“It isn’t,” Dustin confirms, in a tired voice, which is a small comfort seeing as he’s still taking his stuff out of his office. “It’s—different. And I got fired, that’s what happened.”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from The Clash's "I Fought The Law".

outrun, outlast.

“What,” pants Danny, “the *fuck*.”

“My question exactly,” says Luke, leaning against a veiny wall. He and Danny have spent what feels like *hours* in this hellish imitation Harlem, and frankly, Luke’s just about sick of it.

Monsters. *Monsters*. Like the aliens that poured out of the sky so long ago, except those didn’t seem interested in eating their flesh. The monsters on this plane, or whatever this place is besides *not New York that’s for sure*, definitely have flesh on the menu.

Luke’s hoodie has the bite marks and dried saliva to prove it, which, ew.

“It didn’t have a *face*,” says Danny.

“I kinda noticed that, yeah,” says Luke. “Least it’s gone now, but now we gotta be more careful. God only knows what else we’ll find while

we're stuck here."

"More of those things?" says Danny.

"You're supposed to be the optimist here," says Luke, gently bumping his shoulder.

"I just had to outrun a flesh-eating monster with no face and more teeth than anything else in nature, and on top of that I can't summon the Iron Fist without draining myself," says Danny, slumping downwards against the wall. He presses fingers to his temples and breathes in, breathes out. Trying to meditate, Luke realizes. Trying to find some equilibrium. "I'm really not feeling the optimism right now."

Luke slides down with him. "You've got a point," he admits. "This is definitely not how I pictured this day would go."

"I don't think anyone thinks they'll ever get *dragged into another plane*, honestly," says Danny. "Jeez. Colleen must be worried by now."

Luke lets his head hit the wall behind him. "Claire, too," he says. "And Jess."

"Shit," says Danny.

"Indeed," says Luke, breathing out. "And we're stuck here for the time being. Wherever here is." He looks at Danny and says, "Don't suppose you brought anything we could eat?"

He's surprised when Danny wordlessly pulls out a granola bar and says, by way of explanation, "Summoning my chi takes a lot of energy."

"I noticed," says Luke, taking the granola bar from him. He peels the wrapper back, splits the bar in half, and gives Danny the other half. "How many bars of this stuff have you got on you?"

"Seven," Danny sheepishly admits. "We could stretch it to last us a few more days if we needed to."

It isn't ideal, and Luke's not too sure seven granola bars is enough to sustain the both of them over a long time. He sighs, and glances around. Out of the corner of his eye, he spots some mushrooms and flowers growing from the veins, glowing strangely in the darkness.

"Monks ever teach you to forage?" he says, straightening up and getting to his feet.

"Um, yeah, a little," says Danny. "Why—oh. *Oh.*" To his credit, he only looks a little disgusted when it sinks in before he gets to his feet, helps Luke pull the mushrooms and flowers out. "There's stores around," he says. "Maybe they've got food."

They could loot the stores here, certainly, since no one at all even seems to be around to stop them. That's a possibility that's on the table. "No," says Luke, shortly. "Place might not be Harlem, but it *looks* like Harlem." And he'd feel wrong, robbing a mom-and-pop store even here, in this strange, pale imitation of his neighborhood. "I got a lighter here, let's see if there's anything we can use for kindling."

"Maybe those eggshell things," says Danny. "They ought to be good for something." He looks down at the flowers he's gathered up, sniffs them, and makes a face. "If this is what they smell like, I'd hate to find out what they taste like."

"Who knows," says Luke, "maybe they'll smell better when we've cooked them."

And maybe, once they've taken care of that need, they can start figuring out how the hell to get out of here.

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and the law won.

Mike swings by Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz's offices the next day with Lucas in tow, expecting the receptionist to wave them in and let Dustin (well, Franklin, according to the receptionist, which is hardly a better name to go by) know he's coming.

He's not expecting her to frown up at them and say, "Mr. Nelson

doesn't work here anymore."

"What?" says Lucas, stunned.

"What?" says Mike, just as surprised. Dustin had seemed pretty secure in his office just days ago, when Mike had first come by. "Why?"

The receptionist shrugs. "He's supposed to clear out of here today," she says. "Maybe you can catch him. But if you need any legal representation, I wouldn't recommend going to him right now."

"Why not?" Lucas demands.

Another shrug, and she flicks a nail file out of her jacket. "I don't really know," she says. "Something about misconduct."

"*Misconduct?*" says Lucas, incredulously. "Du—*Franklin?* Bullshit."

"In the meantime, however," continues the receptionist, completely unperturbed, "perhaps I can refer you to another lawyer. Ms. Stahl, perhaps? Ms. Walters?"

"No," says Mike, simply. "Just—let him know Mike Wheeler and Lucas Sinclair are coming up."

She does. They take the elevator up, step out onto Dustin's floor and stomp down the aisle to his office. Or not his office anymore, anyway, Mike can see the stacks of files outside.

Dustin steps out, carrying a single box. He almost drops it when he spots Mike and Lucas, and says, "Mike? Lucas? What are you doing here?"

"Could ask you the same thing," says Lucas. "What happened, Dustin?"

"We came to talk to you," says Mike. "What's going on here? It's not —"

"It isn't," Dustin confirms, in a tired voice, which is a small comfort seeing as he's still taking his stuff out of his office. "It's—different."

And I got fired, that's what happened."

"How?" says Mike.

"*Why?*" says Lucas, somehow the more outraged between the two of them.

"Apparently I've been bribing cops with actual money," says Dustin, shaking his head. "Threatening jurors. Violating attorney-client privilege—no, it's got nothing to do with what you asked, Mike, it's more closely associating with a known violent criminal and possibly giving him info on clients. General unethical behavior. *Bull-fucking-shit.*" He slams the box down on the tallest stack, hard enough that Mike jumps a little and Lucas startles back.

"That's what I said," says Lucas, recovering quickly. "You're a lot of things, but you're about as threatening as a cupcake."

"Thanks," says Dustin, his voice hollow as he runs a hand through his hair, and Mike realizes—he's not throwing it back, the way he would've once upon a time.

It seems to sink in for Lucas first, because he steps forward and says, "Tell you what, me and Mike? We'll help you carry all these to—wherever you're taking them."

"Cab," says Dustin, before he blinks and shakes his head, reaching a hand up to furiously wipe at his eyes. "I was gonna call a cab—*fuck*, no, I can't, I don't have a job anymore—"

"Max has a car," says Mike, stepping in to take hold of his old friend's shoulder. "We can call her up, Lucas can sweet-talk her into swinging by—"

"Like sweet-talking Max has ever worked," says Lucas with a huff. "Remember when we tried to talk to her the first time?"

"It works for you now," Mike shoots back, and Dustin laughs wetly, wipes at his eyes with his sleeves.

"As I recall, we were wearing Ghostbusters costumes and you lost your nerve," Dustin says, but he's smiling again, even if it looks like

it's just a hair's breadth away from shattering. Mike's barely ever seen him so heartbroken, and it's a sight he doesn't want to see at all.

"Oh, fuck you, you did too," says Lucas, fondly. "Come on, let's pack this shit up."

Dustin directs them towards what can be packed up, which is vanishingly few. Mike picks up the heaviest box and almost topples over from the weight, and Lucas swears at him and takes it from him.

"We're not gonna cause even more of a scene, Mike, come on," he huffs.

Mike glances briefly at Dustin. His eyes are still wet, but there's a real smile now, and he looks just about ready to laugh. Mike grins back at him, then picks up another box.

They carry the boxes down the corridor, and for a while everything's mostly smooth sailing. Then a woman with short brown hair turns a corner, talking with a mousy secretary, and Dustin's eyes go wide.

"Shit," he says, dropping his box full of bagels, and grabs hold of Mike and Lucas, yanks them into a nearby empty office. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

"Who's that?" says Mike.

"My boss," says Dustin. "Or—former boss. That's Jeri Hogarth. She's a very terrifying lawyer."

Mike glances at Lucas, who's gone tense, eyes narrowing. Lucas looks back at him.

"No," says Dustin, very firmly. "No. Absolutely not, neither of you are going out there to give her hell for firing me, do *not* even think about it."

"But—" Mike starts.

"But she wasn't right to fire you!" snaps Lucas. "You're an asshole, but you're the most honest person I know! Dart aside."

"I thought we agreed never to bring Dart up again," huffs Dustin.

"Should've gotten it in writing, what kind of lawyer are you," says Lucas. "Anyway—"

"You can't go out there to yell at Jeri Hogarth," says Dustin. "You just can't."

"Technically we don't work for her and as of today, neither do you," says Mike. "And we're not really in any legal trouble, so."

"You're gonna be," says Dustin. "Just—don't, okay? For my sake. Bad enough I've gotten fired, and my license is suspended. If you guys get into hot water because of me, I won't be able to defend either of you, and frankly I don't really trust anyone else with your defense."

"Someone might say you're being possessive," says Mike. "Also, biased."

"Fuck you, Wheeler," says Dustin, "you guys would drive the junior associates up the wall."

"That's unfair," says Lucas.

"I have been friends with you for more than twenty years," says Dustin. "Twenty *goddamn* years. In my professional opinion that is a completely fair assessment of how long most other lawyers would last in a room with you, El, Will *and* Max."

Mike stops to think about it, his brain conjuring up a fun little image of some poor baby lawyer in the midst of the usual Party gathering. "Yeah, that's horrifying," he says.

"Most," says Lucas. "I'm guessing Hogarth doesn't count in that, since we're hiding in an office from her."

"I've seen her butt heads with the DA," says Dustin, darkly. "Neither of you stand a chance without El around."

So Mike, reluctantly, waits a few more minutes, until Dustin relaxes a little and lets go of them. Then they steal out of the office, Dustin picking up what's left of his box of bagels and following them down.

The receptionist gives Dustin a saccharinely sweet smile on the way out. Dustin hunches in on himself, his earlier good cheer dissipating. Mike and Lucas slow their steps, falling in beside him.

Mike nudges his side. "So I was thinking," he starts, "you could show us the best places in New York to eat, and we could talk a few things out." Like Nancy, Steve and Jonathan, vanished into thin air, and doesn't that just hurt like a knife in the gut when Mike thinks about it.

"Can't pay, though," says Dustin.

"We could," says Lucas. "Or, well, Mike could." Shameless.

"I wouldn't want to impose—"

Mike slings an arm over his shoulders as they step out onto the sidewalk. He doesn't miss the way Dustin twists around a little, looking sadly up at the building. At the life he's leaving behind, not entirely by choice. "You wouldn't be imposing," says Mike. "You're our friend, and anyway, it's the least we can do, since you're going to be showing us all the best places to eat."

Dustin manages a smile once more, and says, "Yeah, I guess I can accept that argument."

10. you're leaving all the lights on

Summary for the Chapter:

She's putting the cup away when the lights flicker out.

"Goddammit," she mutters. If it's the electricity acting up again, she might actually kill the super. He'd said it was working right this time.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Carbon Leaf's "Bright Lights".

liar, liar.

Jonathan Byers, Matt very quickly finds out, leaves a very distinctive impression on people.

Of course it takes Turk a few good hits to remember the guy, but that problem's solved once Matt's broken a rib or two.

"Jesus fucking *Christ*, Dee," Turk groans. "Yes, okay, fine—Byers, this pasty-ass white boy, the one toting a camera around. Yeah, I remember him now, he was sniffing around after something."

"What was he after?" says Matt.

"Really like the old look, by the way," Turk says. "But what happened to the new one?"

"Turk," says Matt, warningly, stepping closer. The armor's still stashed away in a safe place, needs some repairs since a building got dropped on it, but Matt couldn't—couldn't really go to Melvin, not yet. He's not sure if he can.

So. Back to black it is.

"Okay, okay," says Turk, "okay—some of my shipments, the weapons, real experimental shit like Toomes used to sell. He wanted to know where they were going, said he'd linked them to some

Trainer woman.”

“Who?”

“Yeah, that’s gonna—”

He grabs Turk, shoves him up against the wall with an arm across his throat. Turk wheezes, and his rib sounds like two ships, scraping together.

“Okay,” says Turk. “Okay. Carolyn Trainer.”

“What does she need with weapons?” Matt asks.

“I don’t know!” Not a lie. “I don’t know, I *swear*, man, I’m telling you what I told him, I don’t know why she needs weapons, ‘specially not all that shit Toomes left behind.” Also not a lie. Matt loosens his grip, and Turk’s shirt scrapes softly against the brick wall and the bulletproof vest he’s wearing underneath. Smart.

“What happened to Byers?” says Matt, crouching down. “Do you know?”

“No,” says Turk. His heartbeat ratchets upward. Lie.

Matt gives him a smile. That is, he pulls his lips back and bares his teeth, and he must look a sight, perhaps—clad in black, flashing bloodstained teeth in the darkness. His hand moves, pressing on Turk’s injured side.

Turk makes a pained noise and says, “Some—Some guys came, okay, knocked him and his boyfriend out, threw them in some van—”

“Did you call them there?” says Matt, deadly calm.

“No—ow *Jesus shit yes okay I called them—*”

“Who told you to call them?”

“Some—Some guy, okay, some *shithead* named Billy Hargrove, said he was working for the King of the Kitchen, said he was coming back.” Turk catches a ragged breath, gulps audibly. Matt steps back—

truth.

“Where’s this Billy now?” says Matt.

“Do I look like I know?!” Turk snaps, and Matt just smirks a little. Well, he’s not entirely sure what Turk would look like if he knew, but he knows when the little rat’s telling the truth. This is one of those times. “Fuck, my *side*—”

“Plenty of time to heal in jail, I’m sure,” says Matt.

“Oh, come on, Dee,” Turk whines. “I missed Hell’s Kitchen! Lemme go just this once, yeah? Promise I’ll behave.” Matt doesn’t need to hear his heartbeat to know it’s a lie, Turk’ll say anything to save his own skin, so instead of hearing anything more out of him, Matt simply knocks him out with a good punch.

He shakes his hand out afterwards, clambers back onto the rooftops. It’s risky, stepping out into broad daylight like this, and his side is protesting the trip too—Will Byers won’t be too pleased, if he ever finds out Matt ruined his careful patch job. He’ll probably be happier once Matt lets him know who to track down, but first he needs to find this Billy Hargrove character.

What concerns Matt more, as he runs through the rooftops of his home, is the reference to the King of the Kitchen. It can’t be Fisk. Can it?

After all, who else would have the sheer arrogance to call themselves the King of Hell’s Kitchen?

Matt grits his teeth, lands and rolls to minimize the impact. Fisk’s back, there’s no way around that. He’s not sure how Fisk broke out of prison, but clearly he’s got to find some way to put him back inside. Preferably somewhere far away from New York. *Preferably* in maximum security.

—oh, god. He might go after *Foggy*. Matt can’t allow that, so he takes a route as close to HCB as the rooftops will allow, without anyone catching sight of him, but the second he gets there he realizes he might as well have wasted the time. Foggy’s not there, and judging

from Marci's slightly dejected voice when he zeroes in on her, he's not coming back.

Fired. Jesus Christ. What the hell's Foggy ever done to warrant getting *fired*?

All right. First, he needs to find out who and where this Billy Hargrove is, and give Byers a heads-up.

Then he needs to start looking into whatever's going on that Foggy got fired, and keep an eye (hah!) on his friend as well.

It's a pretty good to-do list.

Then he hears three voices, one of them familiar, from the sidewalk outside of the entrance.

And, from afar, the sound of a car turning the corner.

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distraction tactics.

Max pulls up to the curb just outside of the HCB offices, where her husband and Mike and Dustin are waiting for her, with a stack of boxes beside them. She's almost taken aback, when she sees Dustin's face—he really has changed, since they were all kids. For one thing, he's gotten his hair straightened out.

For another, she's never seen him look so quietly devastated and small. Not even at the Snow Ball. It's enough to make her heart ache a little.

She gets out of the Mustang and says, "Someone called?"

"Max!" says Lucas, leaping up. He slides across the hood to hug her, and perhaps she holds on to him a little tighter than usual. So sue her. Steve's missing, it's making her more than a little emotional. "Hey, Madmax."

"Hey, stalker," Max returns, pecking him on the cheek. She turns to Mike and Dustin and says, "All right, you guys need help loading all

that shit up?”

“Uh, yeah,” says Dustin, blinking at her, floored. Still in shock, she realizes. Getting fired does that to someone.

Mike hauls him up. “Come on, you need to tell us where all the best falafel places are,” he says.

“Gazala’s Place on Ninth Avenue,” says Dustin, immediately, and, yep, there’s the Dustin she knows. She snorts out a laugh and shakes her head, helps him and Mike load up the trunk with boxes of files. They aren’t that many, and she wonders why he’s taking these along with him, on his way out.

“I tried that place,” says Lucas. “Their falafel’s not *that* good.”

“Oh my god, Lucas,” says Dustin, scandalized, and Max has to turn her laugh into a cough. “How have your tastes deteriorated so much? *How?* That’s like saying *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* isn’t a classic of our time.”

“It is?” says Lucas, shutting the trunk. “I just thought it was loud.”

Dustin makes a strangled, horrified noise, and says, “*Lucas!* How the *hell* am I friends with you?!”

“Pretty good distraction tactic,” says Max to Mike, quietly, watching the devastation leach out of Dustin’s face as he falls right back into his usual banter with Lucas, like he never left.

“I think he needs it,” says Mike, just as quiet, as Lucas and Dustin start arguing over the merits of Neil Patrick Harris’ singing. “You saw his face, right?”

“Yeah, he looked like someone set fire to his house in front of him,” says Max. “First Steve, now this.”

“It’s not just Steve,” says Mike. “You didn’t see him freaking out about a Daredevil copycat.”

“The one who saved Will’s life?” says Max. “Come on, why would anyone freak out over that?”

"Maybe if they knew Daredevil they would," says Mike, opening the passenger door. "Where are Will and El, anyway?"

"Police station, filing the missing persons report," says Max. "Last I checked, though, it's going to take them a while. Something about Spider-Man."

Mike shakes his head. "*New York*," he mutters. "Remember when we read about superheroes in comic books?"

"You did," says Max. "I was *cool*."

"Like you didn't borrow *Justice League* 120 from me," huffs Mike. "Where is it, anyway?"

"Somewhere safe," Max assures him, making a mental note to start looking for it once they've found their wayward former babysitter and his spouses. She gets into the driver's seat as Lucas scrambles into shotgun.

"Oh, come on, I said dibs!" Dustin says, indignant even as he concedes defeat by clambering into the backseat, next to Mike.

Max huffs out a laugh. She glances around, and for a moment she's sure she sees a figure in black, crouched on a rooftop nearby.

She blinks. The figure's gone.

Must be a trick of the light, she supposes, but there's an uneasiness to that thought. Like it's a lie she's telling herself, and not even a convincing one at that.

She pulls away from the curb, Dustin and Lucas bickering all the while.

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the lights.

They found Luke's cellphone blaring *So Fresh, So Clean* under a dumpster just the day before, with traces of blood still present in the alleyway. Jessica's working theory is that someone must've ambushed

Danny and Luke and abducted them, but even she admits there's holes in that theory. It doesn't explain the slime, for one thing. Or why someone would try to mop up the blood and do such a bad job.

Claire sits in her apartment, alone and tired. She sips her coffee. It doesn't taste quite the same.

Luke's safe. He has to be. He *has* to be. He's harder to kill than most other people. So's Danny, with that glowing fist of his.

If she can repeat this to herself for long enough, she can start to believe it. She can start to tell it to Colleen without it sounding like a desperate lie.

She drains the rest of her coffee. There's no use just sitting around here waiting on Jessica to call her back with news. She's got to be out there, herself—the worst thing about hanging out with heroes, she thinks wryly, is that their tendency to do everything themselves starts to rub off on her.

She's putting the cup away when the lights flicker out.

"Goddammit," she mutters. If it's the electricity acting up again, she might actually kill the super. He'd *said* it was working right this time.

The lights flicker back on. Then off, then on.

Claire's hung around people like Luke for long enough to know when something's fishy. She looks up at the lights. They're flickering again, faster and faster, in some kind of pattern.

She frowns. A pattern leading her out to the phone?

She steps out of the kitchen and follows the lights. She picks up the phone and hears—heavy breathing, mostly, filtered through static.

"Who is this?" she says. "If this is a prank call, I am really not in the mood—"

"*Claire?*" Luke's voice comes through the speaker, unmistakable even under all the static. "*Claire, can you hear me?*"

Claire makes a terrible little noise, and says, “Luke! Luke, where are you, *where are you*—”

More breathing. She could swear she hears Danny shouting in the distance, but it’s hard to tell, and suddenly the breathing itself changes, becomes—*harsher* somehow.

“Hello?” she says. “Hello? *Luke*, please, where are you—”

Something shocks her mouth, and she jumps back with a scream, dropping the phone. The damn thing *sparks* from the burned mouthpiece, and for a second Claire’s terrified it’s going to burn the carpet.

But it doesn’t, and the lights, flickering before, turn back on and *stay* that way. As if it never happened.

Claire looks down at the phone. Then she scrambles to her feet and goes looking for her cellphone, tries to call Colleen and ends up nearly calling Claudia Kishi instead, her hands are shaking so badly.

Luke. She’d *talked to Luke*. Yeah, sure, for a grand total of ten seconds tops, but she *heard his voice*, he’s *alive*.

Eventually: “*Hello?*” says Colleen, sounding so very, very tired. “*Claire?*”

“You need to get over here,” says Claire. “*Now.*”

11. hard to say there's nothing i regret

Summary for the Chapter:

“Not everything’s related to the Upside-Down,” says Dustin. “Matt—didn’t go into the Upside-Down, that’s for sure.”

“How would you know?” says Lucas.

Dustin licks his lips. “I’d know,” he says, simply.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Of Monsters and Men's "Silhouettes".

on disappearances and old hats.

As it turns out, Dustin knows all the best New York restaurants in town, and even some little holes in the walls that aren't even on Google Maps yet.

Lucas is not even surprised. He's always known Dustin to have a fondness for good food, and right now, he's pretty sure most of them will take anything that'll take their minds off of the charges Dustin's dealing with and the disappearances of Jonathan, Steve and Nancy.

Not that it's succeeding with Lucas, personally. He glances at Mike, sees the worry that flashes briefly across his face, and amends that previous statement: not that it's succeeding with Lucas and Mike.

“Karen introduced me to this place,” says Dustin, pushing the door to some tiny little diner open for them. “She said they served some incredible burgers here. Personally, I’d recommend the poutine.”

“The *what*,” says Lucas.

“They’re *really good*,” says Dustin, which explains exactly zero things about whatever the hell a poutine is. He holds it open for all of them to step through, and gives an exaggerated bow to Max, who laughs and ruffles his hair. Like old times.

"You got your hair cut," she says.

"I wanted to look professional," says Dustin. "I mean. I guess now there's no reason to." There's a distinct heaviness to his voice even when he grins at Max, and Lucas steps closer to sling his arm around Dustin's shoulders, ruffle his hair too. "Lucas!"

"Can we all touch Dustin's new short hair later," says Mike, already at the counter, "I need to know what your orders are. And can someone find us a booth?"

When Mike orders it, they get to it. Lucas finds them a window booth with a perfect view of the street outside, Max tells Mike *two poutines four burgers four Cokes*, and Dustin—

Dustin all but collapses into his seat, exhaling and seemingly deflating, like a balloon with a hole in it.

Lucas doesn't ask him if he's okay. Pretty damn obvious he's not, from the bags under his eyes and the restless twitch of his fingers. Instead he says, "Misconduct?"

"I've never done any of it," says Dustin.

"I believe you," says Lucas. "So does Mike. So would everyone else in the Party."

"I know," says Dustin, "*I know*, it's just—what do I do now? Who would say I bribed or threatened them? The closest to full-on chargeable bribery I ever got was trading cigars in exchange for info, and Brett's not that type of person." He sighs, buries his face in his hands. "God, the *rent* on my apartment—the bills, the food—"

"You don't have to worry about that yet," says Lucas, as Dustin looks back up at him. "You've got, what, until the end of the month? Maybe they'll find out someone lied and you'll get your license back."

"Even if they did, it'd take them a while," says Dustin. "What with the bureaucracy and all. And even then who's going to hire me? This isn't something that just comes out with enough effort, Lucas, this is —" He trails off, hunches his shoulders, and exhales once more. "Jesus Christ. What am I going to *do*?"

"You still know people who are willing to help," says Lucas. "Us, for example. And—your friends here. Like Murdock—"

Dustin's face crumples.

"—or not Murdock, shit, sorry, I forgot," Lucas backtracks quickly, because, shit, how would missing Matt Murdock be able to help Dustin? "Shit, Dustin—"

"It's fine," says Dustin, reaching up a hand to rub at his eyes. "It's—It's fine. Matt's. Um. God, I don't know, it's been six months, you'd *think* it would stop feeling like this."

Days into Will's disappearance, with no one knowing if he was alive or not, and Lucas had been fraying at the edges, ready to snap. Months into El's, and Mike was already snapping at everyone he knew. And now here's Dustin, six months into Murdock's disappearance and days into Steve's. Lucas reaches out his hand to take Dustin's. "I'm sorry," he says, quiet. "Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. It's not—It's not the same, every time."

"Why are we old hats at this?" says Dustin, trying for a smile. It comes out looking like a grimace. "I mean, you'd think, right, by now this whole *the people you love have gone missing* thing gets old."

"Working theory is," says Lucas, "the universe just really hates us. Or it's the Upside-Down fucking with us again."

"Not everything's related to the Upside-Down," says Dustin. "Matt—didn't go into the Upside-Down, that's for sure."

"How would you know?" says Lucas.

Dustin licks his lips. "I'd know," he says, simply, and from what Lucas knows about missing Matt Murdock, he believes him. "Steve, though. Any updates?"

"Definitely not in the Upside-Down either, that's for sure," says Lucas. "But other than that, we've got no clue. Something's blocking Jane from finding him."

"She told me, yeah," says Dustin. "Maybe it's another psychic."

"It would explain the recent rash of disappearances," says Lucas. "This lady Steve was training under said something about that, she said people were just disappearing all of a sudden. Maybe Trainer's found a way to make a new psychic."

"Or a new batch of psychics," says Dustin, the horror dawning in his eyes. He straightens up, the despair seemingly falling away for now. "Oh, god. And if she's working with Fisk, she could supply him with gifted people to use to carry out whatever plans he's got for New York."

"Or she could give him superpowers," says Lucas, just as horrified at the thought.

Dustin shakes his head and manages a tight smile. "He doesn't seem the type to get his hands dirty when he can make other people do it for him," he says. "And if those others are *superpowered*, then New York's going to hell in a handbasket." He pauses. "More than it's already done," he amends.

"And Nancy, Steve and Jonathan are in their hands," says Lucas. His imagination conjures up all sorts of horrendous fates for them, each one more sickening and terrifying than the last. "We have to find them."

"That's what we're already working on," says Mike, coming back with four burgers, four Cokes, and two plates of French fries drenched in cheese and gravy. He slides into the seat next to Dustin.

"The fuck is that?" says Lucas, boggling at the French fries, his hand slipping out of Dustin's.

"That, my tasteless friend, is a poutine," says Dustin, taking a plate. "And they taste *great*."

"They're Canadian," Max informs them, as she sits down next to Lucas. No sooner has she done that than her phone starts to ring, and she sighs. "I've got to take this," she says, and pecks Lucas on the cheek. "Save me a few of those fries."

She stands up and goes, stepping outside to catch a better signal.

Lucas smiles after her, then turns back to Dustin, who's swirling a French fry around in the sauce.

"You're the best person we can ask about this," Mike says. "You were involved in the case against Fisk. I can't believe Jonathan didn't go talk to you, honestly."

"If he tried to talk to me in the past six months, it's highly likely I just let his call go to voicemail," says Dustin. "I was working a lot of cases." He sighs. "It's no excuse."

"Yeah, where'd you pick up that shitty coping mechanism anyway?" says Lucas. "Same place you picked up a love of soggy French fries covered in sauce?"

"Fuck you, Sinclair, the most exotic thing you ever ate was Mrs. Byers' meat loaf," says Dustin, half-heartedly flicking a half-eaten French fry in his direction. "I can give you some stuff about Fisk, but I need a promise that we're going to do this the smart way. No charging in half-cocked trusting Jane's powers. For all we know, they've managed to recreate that Kilgrave asshole's abilities."

"Kil-who now?" says Lucas.

Dustin shivers. "Guy who could make you do anything he wanted, like he kept rolling natural twenties on his persuasion checks," he says. "I never ran into him, thank god, but one of my cli—one of my former clients who I'll have to inform about my suspension later, she did. And it fucked her up like nothing else."

"Okay, so that's a possible power we'll have to keep an eye out for," says Mike.

"We are not," says Dustin, firmly, "because we're going to be smart about this and not get ourselves *killed*." He grabs a napkin, pulls a pen out of his jacket, and says, "So here's what I know about Fisk, especially the things he's done..."

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zoomer and the private eye.

“Hello?” says Max.

“*Yeah, is this Max Sinclair?*” says an unfamiliar voice over her phone. A woman’s, though she sounds a little rough. “*I’m Jessica Jones. Claire gave me your number.*”

“Yeah, I’m Max,” says Max, bouncing on her heels and looking around. “Why’re you calling?”

“*Do you know Luke Cage and Danny Rand?*” says Jones.

“The hero of Harlem and the boy billionaire, yeah,” says Max. “Again, why’re you calling? What does this have to do with them?”

“*A lot of things,*” says Jones. “*But we can talk about that in person, ‘cause I’m just about to come around the corner.*”

“Have you been *stalking* me?” snaps Max, whipping around to see—a woman in a leather jacket, coming around with her phone to her ear.

The woman stops, casually, and looks her in the eye.

“I’m a PI,” says Jessica Jones, and somehow even across the street her voice carries, “it’s what I do.” She ends the call there, walks up to Max. “If it helps, I didn’t see you until you guys hit up that falafel place on Ninth Avenue. Even with that Mustang of yours.”

“You couldn’t have just called like a normal person?” says Max.

“I did,” says Jones. “I gave you a heads-up I was coming. Most people don’t even get that much.”

“I’m so grateful for that,” Max mutters. Jesus. A *private investigator*. Who the fuck would send a PI after her?

“Don’t be,” says Jones, cocking her head towards Dustin, Mike and Lucas, engrossed in their discussion. Their heads are bent now over a napkin that Dustin’s drawing on. “I’m just here because Nelson is.”

Nelson? Oh. “Dustin,” says Max.

“I’m one of his clients,” says Jones. “Plus his buddy of mine was—a

friend, kind of, so I gotta look out for the guy.”

Max stares at her for a moment, then shakes her head, crosses her arms, and rolls her eyes up to the sky. “If this is a shovel talk—” she starts.

“It’s not,” says Jones. “It’s a *Luke Cage and Danny Rand are missing* talk, and from what I hear from Claire, you were one of the last to hear from them.”

Something cold drops into Max’s stomach, ties her gut into knots. “What?” she says, almost expecting her to say *gotcha*, almost expecting to see Cage or Rand popping out of an alleyway just to surprise her or something. Except—

“Luke Cage and Danny Rand,” says Jones, enunciating every word like she’s speaking to a child, “are missing.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time,” snaps Max, itching to ditch this woman and head back inside. Her mind replays the last time she saw Claire, in the Wing woman’s dojo, waiting anxiously for her and Lucas to leave, and it clicks.

Cage had been missing, by then, and she’d dropped by to give her friend the bad news.

Oh, god.

“Do you know anything about this?” says Jones. “Does my lawyer?”

“I think,” says Max, very calmly, “that if Luke Cage and Danny Rand went missing because I asked them to help me, maybe I don’t feel like involving a nosy PI into my business.”

“And *maybe*,” says Jones, her tone deadly calm, “I don’t feel like letting my current lead to my friend go.”

“So maybe we’re at an impasse,” says Max. “Believe me, Miss Jones, I’m doing this for your own good. If Cage and Rand are missing—”

“If they’re missing and you know something,” Jones cuts in, “I think you should stop worrying about what’s good for me and start

worrying about your *own* good.”

“Is that a threat?” says Max, stepping closer. Jones doesn’t look like much, not to her, but the way she holds herself says she’s ready to defend herself if necessary. If push came to shove and they came to a fight, Max is pretty sure she’d only win over Jones by a narrow margin. Probably.

Then:

“Holy shit, Jessica Jones?” Dustin’s voice cuts through the air, startling both Max and Jones. Max whips around to see him poking his head out of the restaurant. “What are you *doing* here?”

“Could ask you the same thing, Foggy Nelson,” says Jones.

“Having lunch with some old friends,” says Dustin. “That’s what I’m doing. You?”

“Doing my job,” says Jones. “Cage and Rand disappeared. This girl,” and she jerks a thumb at Max, “was one of the last to see them. I was just asking her some questions.”

“You looked like you were going to slug each other right here on the street,” says Dustin.

“Not really,” says Jones.

“Yeah, *right*,” huffs Max, turning to glare at her. “I told her to quit poking her nose in. She said she wasn’t going to.”

“I said you’re my lead to my friend,” says Jones.

Dustin’s eyes dart between her and Jones. For a second Max isn’t quite sure what he’ll do, if he’ll side with her or with his erstwhile client—then she feels guilty about that doubt. Years of being a lawyer hasn’t changed him that much, has it?

“Okay, you two,” he says. “Inside. Now.” He points at Jessica and says, “I hope you have money, because I’m not paying for your food. I’m too damn broke.”

“I thought Hogarth was paying you a fortune,” Jones retorts.

“She’s not paying me anymore,” says Dustin. “I got fired and my license got suspended, didn’t you hear?” He opens the door for Jones to head inside.

“Oh,” says Jones, and for the first time since she turned the corner, Max sees her flush a little, ducking her head and scratching the back of her neck. “Shit. So that’s why she was calling me.”

“And you just hit ignore?” says Dustin. “She’s your lawyer again, you probably shouldn’t do that. You know. Just in case someone sues you again.”

“That hasn’t happened in a month,” Jones retorts.

“And may the streak last,” says Dustin, shaking his head as Max comes inside. “I’m—really sorry, Max.”

“Your new friends suck,” Max informs him. “You downgraded.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware,” says Dustin with a sigh.

12. strange days have tracked us down

Summary for the Chapter:

“Uh, Jess—don’t get me wrong, I’m a big believer in telling people stuff, but this kind of thing is. The more people who know about it, the riskier it is.”

“Now where have I heard that before?” says Jessica.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from The Doors' "Strange Days".

cw: Billy Hargrove exists and is as awful as he is in canon. that means homophobia and misogyny. (who wants Matt to punch his face in real good, I know I do.)

we'll get them back.

“Luke talked to you?” says Colleen, staring at the phone.

“Yeah, he did,” says Claire, scrubbing a hand over her face. The lights have stayed on since Colleen got here, and the phone hasn’t started to ring again. Whatever happened just hours ago, before Colleen finished up her classes and swung by Claire’s apartment, is most likely not going to happen any time soon.

Hell, if it wasn’t for the phone lying on the carpet, she’d think it was all some kind of hallucination or something, driven by grief and worry.

But there’s the phone, and the blackened mouthpiece. It had been real.

It had been real.

“Did you get to talk to Danny?” says Colleen.

“Not really,” says Claire. “I heard him, yeah, but more like—he was

somewhere nearby and I happened to pick up his voice.” She sighs, runs a shaking hand through her hair. Hours afterward, and she’s still half-expecting the lights to start flickering again on her. “It’s a miracle I managed to make out his voice, honestly. There was so much *static*.”

“But you’re sure?” says Colleen.

“Yes,” says Claire. “I am.”

Colleen nods, accepting. “There were stories in the Hand that I never really thought about,” she says, quietly, “but they were about—other planes, connected to this one by threads. Like K’un-Lun. Sometimes you could tug on one thread from one plane and it would affect the other one.” She picks up the phone. “Maybe they’re in one of those planes.”

Other dimensions. Jesus Christ. Every time Claire starts to think that maybe she’s finally seen everything, that New York’s thrown everything it could throw at her, something new pops up and throws everything right back into disarray.

“Did these stories say anything about how to get there?” she says.

Colleen shakes her head, placing the phone back into its cradle. “Not a thing,” she says. “Except when it came to K’un-Lun, but I don’t think there’s any portal to K’un-Lun in New York.”

“Yeah, else we wouldn’t have to go all the way to China,” Claire mutters. She pinches the bridge of her nose, looks up at the lights again. “They must’ve found a way, though. If not to Danny’s ancient mystical city, maybe to some other place. Maybe—Maybe that alleyway was a *gate*, somehow.”

“A gate to what?” says Colleen.

“Question of the year,” says Claire. “You feel like taking another look? Maybe there’s something we missed.”

“Or maybe it works like the gate to K’un-Lun,” says Colleen. “Only accessible after God knows how much time, and that time’s already passed.” She shakes her head, jaw tightening. “Are there any other

gates? Any other ways?"

"I can—do something with the lights," says Claire. "Just in case Luke and Danny try to contact us again. I can ask then." She looks up at her lightbulb and lets out a tired sigh. "Talking through lights. Other dimensions. Jesus Christ."

Colleen lays a hand on her shoulder, gentle, and Claire lets out a long, slow breath. "Hey," says Colleen. "It's okay. If it helps, I'm—a little freaked out too." She squeezes her shoulder, and Claire lets her guide her to the couch so they can sit down.

"It sounds insane," Claire confesses, glancing at her phone. "If it wasn't for that I wouldn't even be sure if it was real."

"It is real," says Colleen, conviction in her voice. "And I believe you. And if you need me to, I'll sit here with you until they try to contact us again."

Claire smiles at her. "Thanks, Colleen," she says.

"Welcome," says Colleen.

"You do have to look after your place, though," says Claire. "And, who knows, maybe—maybe they'll talk to you, too."

Colleen sighs, looks around the place. "I don't know," she says. "Without Danny or the students around, the place just feels a little—cold."

"I know how that feels," says Claire. "Apartment's a lot emptier, somehow." Maybe it's just her, but even when Luke was in prison, the apartment hadn't felt half as cold and empty. She'd always known he'd come out of it.

She's not so sure now. Some part of her is not certain if this other dimension will have as much mercy.

Colleen's hand takes hers. It's calloused from holding a sword, and warm as well. "We'll find them," she promises. "We'll get them back."

Somehow, Claire believes her.

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secrets.

If anyone told Foggy, before this week, that he'd be spending his afternoon with three of his oldest, dearest friends from Hawkins and Jessica Jones, he'd have laughed at them.

Then again, if anyone ever told him he'd be charged with misconduct and his license to practice suspended, he'd have laughed at them too. Both those things have happened this week alone.

And now here's Jessica Jones, crammed into the booth on Foggy's side.

"So," starts Mike, "you stalked us all the way from Gazala's Place?"

"Not that hard," says Jessica, stealing fries off of Foggy's plate. She waves a fry at Max, who frowns at her, her nose scrunching up. "She drives a Mustang. It was just a matter of following the big-ass muscle car."

"In retrospect," says Max, begrudgingly, "yeah, maybe I should've just rented a less conspicuous car."

Lucas doesn't say anything, but he picks his Coke and sips loudly enough that they all get his meaning.

"Why?" says Mike.

"Because, again, Luke and Danny are missing," says Jessica. "And Mustang lady here's the last person to have seen them." She pops the fry into her mouth. "And now I find out my lawyer—don't look at me like that, *former* lawyer—is tangled up with you guys."

"Thanks for the concern, Jess," says Foggy, rubbing at his temples. "I guess. But you don't have to be worried, Mike, Lucas and Max are old friends of mine."

"Who said I was worried?" says Jessica. "You're the only lawyer in

this shithole who puts up with me. If some dumbass who can't take the truth tries to sue me for defamation and slander, I'm going to need your legal expertise."

"What about Hogarth?" says Foggy.

Jessica's smile is sardonic, sharp like a knife's edge. Barely a smile. "Let's just say we aren't exactly on the best of terms," she says. "Why are these fries soggy?"

"I *told* you," says Lucas.

"Oh, shut up, Lucas," Foggy grumbles, before looking to Mike, who shakes his head *no*. "Uh, Jess—don't get me wrong, I'm a big believer in telling people stuff, but this kind of thing is. The more people who know about it, the riskier it is."

"Now where have I heard that before?" says Jessica.

"You can't possibly want to get in on this," says Max. "Not if you're so uncaring."

Foggy's known Jessica for long enough that she isn't, not really. He can see it in the way her eyes dart briefly down, her fingers drumming on the tabletop. Then she looks up and shrugs. "You're right, I don't," she says, "but Luke's my friend. I want to know what happened to him."

Max huffs out a breath. "I asked him and Rand to help us find Nancy, Jonathan and Steve," she says, at last. "I didn't ask him to go actively *looking*, just to give us a heads-up if anything popped up."

"We can't advise you to go looking for them," says Lucas. "This is—it's big. None of us can tell you much about it, not even Dustin."

"I can keep a secret," says Jessica, simply.

"I know you can," says Foggy. "But this isn't a question of not trusting you to keep a secret, because I would trust you—"

"I don't," says Max. "She *stalked* us."

"I agree," says Mike. "Some client you've got here, Dustin."

"—but it's a question of the multiple NDAs we signed," Foggy continues, narrowing his eyes in Max and Mike's direction. "We literally *can't* tell you shit. Not until it becomes a matter of life and death."

"What about Luke's life and death? Danny's, Claire's?" says Jessica, her words barbed as she meets Foggy's gaze. There's steel in those dark eyes of hers, the kind that doesn't tarnish easily no matter how much alcohol she tries to drown herself in. "That doesn't matter to you?"

He thinks of Claire, her hand in Luke's, her words to him about Matt in the wake of Midland Circle. He thinks of Luke, asking after her on his way out of prison. Luke, who'd sat down next to him and told him, quiet, that he'd known Matt for a few days at most, but he knew he was a good man.

He thinks of Danny, trying so hard to protect the city that Matt left behind. He breathes out.

"It *does*," says Foggy. "If we tell you anything about this, even just enough to help you find Luke and Danny, you have to accept the risks—"

"Give us a moment, Miss Jones," says Mike, quickly, grabbing hold of Foggy's arm. "We're just gonna have a party discussion."

"It'll be quick, we swear," says Lucas, as he and Max stand up.

"What the *hell*?" says Jessica.

"Don't eat all the fries," says Foggy, as he, Mike, Lucas and Max hurry towards the men's bathroom, with Max ducking behind him and Lucas.

The door shuts, and Mike whispers, "You can't just tell her!"

"I'm not," says Foggy, "but she's asking for help. Luke is *missing* because of this, and Jessica might be a good PI, but even she needs leads." He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I'm not going to tell her

everything, just—enough to help her out a little.”

“What if Trainer goes after her, too?” says Lucas.

“I’ve seen Jessica lift a car,” says Foggy. “And not, like, a Beetle. She lifted a *minivan*.”

“Luke’s bulletproof and *he’s* missing,” says Lucas.

“Also, she stalked us,” says Max, pulling the collar of her shirt up to her nose. “I know you like and trust her for some inexplicable reason, but she followed us around town. In my opinion, that’s a big fat red mark against her.”

“She’s a *private investigator*,” says Foggy. “That’s part and parcel of the job. And, shit, she’s probably one of the best ones I know.”

“Even if she is one of the best private eyes you know,” says Mike, “who’s to say Trainer and Fisk won’t go after her, either? Who’s to say the government won’t?”

“We’re not going to tell her about—*that*, of course not,” says Foggy. “Just—point her in Trainer’s general direction. We’re not even going to ask her to do any active investigation.”

“Neither did I,” says Max, a little bitter, “and look what happened.”

“We can’t tell her,” says Mike. “We’d put her in danger.”

“We’d put Luke and Danny in danger, wherever they are,” says Foggy, and he knows this, he knows these people, he knows beyond a doubt that the last thing any of them wants is someone else in danger, because of them. “Do you guys want that? Do you want to be the reason why Harlem loses its hero, why Danny Rand disappears for the second and final time? *Do you?*”

Silence falls over them, and it’s only then that Foggy realizes he’d raised his voice, like he was trying to argue his case in court. Like he was trying to argue his case with *Matt*.

Max scrubs a hand over her eyes. “Real dick move,” she mutters, but whether that’s to Foggy or to herself, Foggy’s not sure.

Lucas breathes out. "He's right," he says.

Mike shakes his head. "Max is right," he corrects. "You might like and trust her, but I don't."

"You don't know her," says Foggy. "I'm—I *was* her lawyer. I've got an idea what she's like."

Mike pinches the bridge of his nose. "Okay," he says. "Let's put it to a vote. All in favor of telling Jessica Jones *some* things, raise your hands."

Foggy raises his hand. So does Lucas.

After a moment, and with a muffled sigh, Max raises hers.

"Fine," says Mike, sounding distinctly unhappy and shooting Max a slightly betrayed look. "We'll tell her about Trainer. I hope you're right about this, Dustin."

"Come on," says Foggy, pushing the door open and noting, with some dismay, that Jessica's pouring some of her flask into *his* Coke, "when have I ever steered you wrong?"

"That one time during the Thessalhydra campaign," says Lucas.

"Besides that time," says Foggy, with a huff.

"You really want me to get into it?" says Lucas. "Because there's a lot. I have them alphabetized."

"Don't say any of them in front of Jessica," says Foggy. "I've got an image to maintain."

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every step you take.

Matt finds Billy Hargrove in a rundown apartment building, somewhere between a construction site for a more upscale office building and an old brick-and-mortar affair populated by all sorts.

He hadn't exactly wanted to leave Foggy behind, when the three had bundled him into their gas-guzzling monstrosity, but he'd heard the heavy, slightly unsteady tread of Jessica's combat boots, following after the car, her quiet, worried curse. *Shit, Nelson?*

Jessica's probably the next person he'd trust, to look after Foggy. He'd let them go, secure in that knowledge that she'd keep an eye on them, and went looking for Hargrove.

All right, maybe he'd gotten the drop on and beat up a few people until they gave him an address. That's still looking, kind of.

Anyway—he's just here for recon. He drops onto a fire escape, near the apartment building, and listens close, sorting out the chaff from what's relevant.

Goddammit, James, just tell me the fucking—

Oh, god, yes, harder, harder—

—miss him, y'know, like I'd miss the air—

—never gonna be anything, do you hear me, never—

—after Byers? What, a queer beat your ass in? Jesus fucking Christ, Troy, don't give me that shit about the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. You a fucking girl or something, that someone in a black mask playing dress-up's enough to make you piss your pants?

Matt's clenching his teeth. With effort, he forces himself to relax, let go. He's not here just to punch Hargrove's teeth out, he's here to gather information, confirm any links to Fisk that he might have.

But god, does he want to.

"You didn't see him! You don't know!" Ah, there's the man who chloroformed Will. "He's not human, I swear, he just dropped in on us and he broke my wrist, Hargrove, he broke my fucking wrist—"

"I'll break more than that, you useless piece of shit, we're on the clock here." So Hargrove's got a deadline, and it's stressing him enough that he's just shoved his lackey up against something.

Judging by the sound of clattering plastic, probably a shelf of DVDs. “King’s new girl wants the other Byers. Don’t know why, didn’t ask. Go find him.”

Not if Matt does first. He takes off into the—well, into the afternoon. Byers won’t be alone, most likely, he’ll be with someone he knows, and sure enough once Matt’s in the territory of the precinct, he hears a woman’s voice drifting up to him. She sounds vaguely familiar.

“—think they’re still in New York?” Byers is saying to her, once Matt steps closer.

“I know they’re still in New York,” says the woman, sounding frustrated. “*Where* is a different question. Every time I try to look for them, something’s keeping me out. I can’t get more than a general sense of where they are.”

“It’s fine,” Byers says. “Or—it isn’t fine, but you can’t push yourself so far, El.”

El huffs out a breath. “I’m not,” she says. “You’d know if I was.”

“True,” says Byers. “But—I worry.”

“You don’t need to,” says El. “I know my limits. Anyway, you’re starting to sound like Hop.”

“Oh, shit, I am, aren’t I?” says Byers, managing a tired laugh. “We’re turning into our parents. That’s just horrifying.”

“Next thing you know you’ll be growing a beard and yelling at kids to stop being stupid,” says El. “Want me to walk you back to the apartment? I can keep you company.”

“Sure,” says Byers, “though, you’ve got that appointment with your publisher later, right? You can’t blow that off to keep me company.”

“I could,” says El, somewhat belligerently. Matt reins in a quiet laugh. She sounds like Foggy, he thinks, trying to get him to take a break from studying for just one night.

“You can’t,” says Byers. “I’ve been there, El, they’re not exactly going

to take it well if you blow them off.”

“My brother, my sister-in-law, and their husband are missing, they can shove it,” says El.

“I missed one appointment because I got sick,” says Byers. “*One*. And then I had to assure them all that yes, I’m reliable, yes I can make the deadlines for the graphic novel, yes I know what I’m committing to, I just got sick.”

“Mouthbreathers,” says El, with all of a woman’s weariness. “You’re sure?”

“Just walk me back and leave me there, it’ll be fine,” says Byers. “I’ve been in empty houses before.”

“Yeah, but that was the Upside Down,” says El, and Matt frowns. Upside what now?

“Yep,” says Byers. “Less monsters here. Come on, let’s get moving.” His vague, flaming shape in Matt’s world on fire links with El’s, and the two of them set off down the sidewalk, rubber slapping against the cement as loud as thunder. Matt waits a minute, then starts off after them.

13. with a desperate heart

Summary for the Chapter:

Max says, "For the record, I still don't trust you."

Jessica shrugs. "Smart of you," she says.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Jefferson Starship's "Desperate Heart".

jonesius pollywogus.

Trish drops by Jessica's place, squints at the terrarium, and says, "Is it just me, or did Nougat grow legs?"

"Nougat grew legs," says Malcolm, setting down a book on reptiles. "Just happened, like, two hours ago."

"*Weird*," says Trish, bending down to squint at Nougat. Malcolm's starting to worry the terrarium might not be big enough for him, if he's growing so fast in just a matter of days. "Aw, hey, little guy, remember me?"

Nougat chitters happily at her. Yeah, he remembers her.

Malcolm leans on Jessica's desk. "So, if he's a new species, does that mean I get naming rights for the Latin name?" he asks.

"Sure," says Trish, with a shrug. "But if you're taking suggestions, I'm fond of *Jonesius pollywogus*."

"We're not even sure if he is a pollywog," huffs Malcolm, with a laugh. "But that's funny, that was the exact same name I was thinking."

"Great minds think alike," says Trish, loftily, taking out a plastic baggie of lettuce from her bag. "Hey, Nougat. I got you a snack."

"Defeating the whole point of his name there, Trish," says Malcolm.

"I just need to test something out," says Trish, dropping leaves into the terrarium. Nougat noses curiously at them, before tearing into them with surprising savagery. "Wow, little guy's an opportunistic feeder."

"And that," sighs Malcolm, "gets rid of half my options."

"The other half?"

"Chocolate's not a recommended food," says Malcolm, stepping closer and looking through the glass at Nougat. "Did you talk to anyone who could help?"

"I've got a friend downtown who works in the Bronx Zoo," says Trish. "I can give him a call, we can get him up here." She pets Nougat's head with her finger, and the little—well, whatever Nougat is whines happily, in his strange, shrill, warbling way. "I'm still trying to find out who sent him," she says.

"Maybe you can talk about it on your radio show," says Malcolm. "Mention how wonderful it is when your fans send you gifts but could they make sure you have room for them, first?"

Trish hums. "I'll think about it," she says.

Nougat chitters again, clearly satisfied with his lot in life. Malcolm reaches a hand in to pet his head, gets a contented little—it sounds like a purr, would probably be one if it came from a cat. From Nougat, it sounds like a strange little warble.

"*Jonesius pollywogus*," says Malcolm. "How do you like that, little guy?"

--

do something.

Jessica's halfway through Nelson's mess of fries and sauce when the man himself, along with his entourage of strange distrustful tourists, comes back to the table.

She scoots over, taking his fries and Coke with her.

Max says, “For the record, I still don’t trust you.”

Jessica shrugs. “Smart of you,” she says.

“We talked about it,” starts Max’s husband, what did Claire say his name was? Lucas, yes. “And we decided to let you in, mostly because Dustin kind of banged our heads together and yelled at us about lives being in danger.”

“Metaphorically,” says Nelson.

“You did yell a little,” says the other one, the tall guy with the dark mess of curls.

“I *projected*,” says Nelson, “it’s a courtroom thing.”

“A men’s bathroom isn’t a courtroom!” huffs Curly.

Jessica coughs, and takes a sip. “Do you know anything about where Luke and Danny are?” she asks.

Nelson drums his fingers against the tabletop. “We’ve got a working theory,” he says. “Do you know who Carolyn Trainer is?”

“That’s the CEO of that new company, what was it, Trainer Sciences and Tech?” Jessica shrugs, idly stirring her Coke. “I’ve heard of her, yeah. And of some of the stuff she’s allegedly been up to—wait, you don’t think...”

“It’s only speculation right now,” says Nelson, quietly, glancing around nervously. “But Nancy and Jonathan were looking into some of those rumors when they and Steve disappeared. And one of those rumors—they say Trainer’s working with Fisk, God only knows why, or *how*.”

Jessica straightens up, Fisk’s name like a cold shock. She’s heard of him. Every goddamn person in Hell’s Kitchen has heard of Wilson Fisk, crime lord masquerading as philanthropist, and his fall from grace. Jessica hadn’t given him much thought, before now, but if he has Luke and Danny—

“They were jumped in an alleyway,” she says, out loud.

“What?” says Nelson, eyes growing wide. “How? Who’d get the jump on them?”

“I don’t fucking know,” says Jessica, “but—that’s his MO, right?”

“Not exactly,” says Nelson, shaking his head. “Fisk’s MO when we took him down was to pass off all the dirty work to other people if he could. Less blame to be pinned on him, that way.” He chews on his lower lip in thought and says, “Could’ve changed, though.”

Lucas rests an elbow up on the table. “Did you see this alleyway?” he asks.

“Yeah, it was the first thing I checked out,” says Jessica. “Whoever jumped them did a real bad job of cleaning up the mess afterwards. I found Luke’s cellphone under the dumpster, and there was still some traces of blood around, like someone had tried to mop it up.”

“Amateurs,” Nelson mutters. “What, he couldn’t afford professionals?”

“Did you find anything else?” says Curly. “A body, something, anything?”

“Not a damn thing,” says Jessica, shaking her head. “So, what, you’re saying that Fisk is back, and he’s probably got Luke and Danny? What the hell would he need with either of them? They’re both way out of his territory.”

“Maybe he’s looking to expand,” says Curly, darkly, like he’s got personal experience with crime lords wanting to expand their territories. He shoots Nelson a significant look, one loaded with history that Jessica doesn’t have with any of them. *Stranger and stranger*, she thinks, and she takes a sip of her Coke.

The whiskey it’s been mixed with barely burns, going down.

“No, he doesn’t work that way,” says Nelson, shaking his head. “He wanted Hell’s Kitchen. Not Harlem, not Wall Street. If he wanted to expand further out, why wait until now? Why not expand when he still had the resources and the people?”

"Maybe he didn't think about it until he was in prison," says Max.

"No, he sounds like a long-term planner," says Lucas. "If he wants anything he's already figured out how to get it. Right, Dustin?"

"Yeah, you got it," says Nelson. "I think—if Luke and Danny are missing, it's highly likely they ran afoul of the same things that Nancy, Steve and Jonathan did. And if you're going to look for them, *you have to be careful*, Jessica. I can't stress this enough."

That old instinct to run rears its ugly head in Jessica's gut, once more. She wants to give in and get out of this booth. She wants to find a liquor store and drown herself in alcohol. She wants to not have to deal with this bullshit, involving crime lords and her average-ass lawyer and the secrets she *knows* these people are still hiding from her.

But—

Luke had sat down beside her once. Had said that, despite everything she had done to him, when push came to shove, he was glad it wasn't her, at the bottom of the hole where Midland Circle used to be.

God, she could've almost had something with him. The least she can do is make sure Claire gets that something, because Claire's halfway decent.

She downs her Coke. "I'm always careful," she says, but even to her it sounds hollow. She hopes none of them can hear the lie. "I'm going to need as much as you guys can give me on Trainer. And on Fisk too, Nelson."

"You poured alcohol into Coke," says Curly, "that's not usually a sign someone's *careful*."

"You called me and basically *accused* me of having something to do with Cage and Rand disappearing," snaps Max.

"I didn't *accuse* you of shit, lady," says Jessica. "I just stated the facts."

"Guys," Curly says, warningly.

"There's some boxes of files in the car, we can drop copies off at your place once we're done looking them over for relevance," says Lucas.

"Of course I will," says Nelson. He glances away from Jessica, to all his tourist friends, before looking back at her. "The files on Fisk are still at my apartment, and I can ask Karen to pass on what she does have."

"Do that," says Jessica, standing up. "In the meantime, I'm gonna go check out the alleyway again, see if anything's changed since the last time I was there." And then she'll start asking around—not about Fisk, not about Trainer. "By the way, uh," she adds, "just a question."

"What?" says Curly, snappish. Nelson flicks his shoulder. "Ow, Dustin!"

"Is there anything about IGH in those files you're talking about?" says Jessica. "Anything that could conceivably have those initials?"

Nelson frowns. "I don't think so," he says, uncertainly.

"There's nothing that could have those initials, from what we've got of Nancy's research," says Curly. "Why?"

"Nothing," says Jessica, stomach churning uneasily. She's got a bad feeling about this, but she isn't sure what. "Just—a cold case that I've been working on the side." She shrugs. "Nothing important."

"If you're sure," says Nelson. "Hey—if anything weird turns up, can you let me know?"

"Fine," says Jessica. "Yeah, I'll let you know."

--

deal with the devil.

The thing about Jonathan's apartment is that—it's never felt this cold, before. Not even when the heating broke in the middle of winter when Will stayed over, once, when he was first doing a promotional tour for his graphic novel.

He remembers: Steve had cursed out the heating and the superintendent and the shitty New York weather, and Jonathan had rolled his eyes at his husband's drama and brought out the electric blankets. Nancy had made them all some hot chocolate, cuddled up next to Will, and asked him to tell her about the graphic novel, since her editor was riding her ass about the thinkpiece she'd promised she'd do.

"I thought you didn't have to anymore," Will had said.

"It's the winter," Nancy had said, "and news gets slow around this time. Tell you the truth, I'm willing to cover yet another of Tony Stark's scandals to get out of writing this thinkpiece, but since you're here, I might as well get it over with."

"Only if you pay me in marshmallows," Will had told her, and she'd laughed before she shouted at Steve, who was rummaging through the drawers for a pair of socks that would fit Will, to get some marshmallows.

Before they went to sleep, Jonathan had sat down next to Will, and asked him about his story. *Really* asked him, with no intention of publishing any of it, about the characters, the quest, the music he'd listened to when he was writing it.

They had fallen asleep together on the couch, listening to the playlist Will had curated for his graphic novel, and the next day when Will woke up there was a blanket draped over the both of them.

He digs out that blanket now, wraps it around himself, and slumps into the couch. They've fixed the heating since then, but the apartment still feels—cold, hollow, empty without Nancy's laughter, Steve's bad jokes, Jonathan's music.

He shuts his eyes. Opens them again, half-expecting to see dark, pulsing veins creeping up the walls.

Nothing. It's just the same old apartment it's ever been, with Jonathan's photographs and Nancy's stories hanging on the wall. Just. Colder.

Some tiny little part of him wishes he hadn't sent Jane away, but she's got to meet with her publisher. Life has to go on, even when it should've rightfully paused.

...he should talk to his editor too, he supposes. And Kamala. He knows Kamala would understand why he'd missed the deadline, and with some explaining he's sure his editor will too, it's just—it's just—

It's like the world is spinning too fast, and meanwhile Will can't even bring himself to lift a foot to even attempt to keep up with it. Not for the first time, he wonders if this is how his mother felt. If this is how she's feeling right now.

God, his mom. He should call her, let her know how they're doing, give her some kind of update on Jonathan even if it's just—more of the same.

He's about to pull his phone out to do exactly that when he hears heavy footsteps, landing on the fire escape.

His heart leaps into his throat. He grabs the heaviest object he can lift, a thick book on photography that he vaguely recognizes as Jane's Christmas gift to her adoptive brother, and creeps slowly towards the fire escape.

Then: "You might want to put that down," says the Devil, sounding a little bit amused as he lifts open the window. He has the audacity to *smirk*, the shithead.

Will stares at him. Slowly, he sets the book down.

"Can I come in?" says the Devil. "I. Have something I need to tell you." The smirk fades. "It's about your brother. I know who took him, and I know where he lives."

Will breathes out. This is a bad idea. This is a horrible, terrible idea. Hadn't Dustin called this Devil a fake? He'd been incredibly sure of it, too. He should tell the Devil to get out of the apartment, leave him alone and never return. Who *knows* what the Devil might do to him, while he's alone and shaken up from his brother's disappearance?

But then again—the Devil had saved his life. The Devil let him patch

him up, even if, and Will spies the way his mouth twists into a pained grimace, he went and ruined it a minute later. And Will had been unconscious in his presence for some time. If the Devil wanted to do anything unsavory to him then, he never would have known until it was too late.

Will steps aside and says, "Yeah, you can come in."

14. out of your way i'll go

Summary for the Chapter:

"Because I can't think of anything he or anyone he's allied with could possibly want out of me."

His heartbeat ticks up.

Lie.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Hurts' "Guilt".

the demogorgon in the room.

Matt steps into Jonathan Byers' apartment, and the first thing that registers about it is that even days after their disappearances, the owners' scents are still all over the place. Fading, without them around certainly, but they've been here for long enough that they've left traces of themselves here and there.

He smells hairspray, mingled with citrus shampoo and lavender perfume and the faint scent of chemicals, used for developing pictures. He smells old paper—someone keeps their files here.

His world on fire tells him: this isn't a very big apartment. There's some furniture around, a couch, some chairs, a little beanbag chair that's more threadbare than the other chairs, a coffee table. There's a kitchen, fully furnished and still stocked. There's a single bedroom and a bathroom, and judging from that chemical scent there's a darkroom. Perhaps there's even a nice view, although it's not like Matt would know.

"You could take that mask off, you know," says Will Byers, as he moves into the kitchen, rummaging around for something. His heart rate's starting to slow once more, from the scare Matt must've given him when he dropped onto the fire escape. "I won't tell."

"I can't," says Matt. "I know you won't, but I have enemies after me

who have no qualms about endangering innocent lives.” He sits in one of the chairs, one of the newer ones that smells like oak. “I don’t just keep this secret to protect myself. There are—others, that I have to look out for too.”

Like Karen. Like Foggy. Like the people of Hell’s Kitchen, of his *home*.

“Others,” echoes Byers. “You know, my friend Dustin says you’re not the real Daredevil—but the way you talk, I’m not so sure he’s right.”

“Maybe your friend’s right,” says Matt. “Maybe I’m just trying to carry on his legacy.”

“Weird legacy to take up, then,” says Byers. “Most people go into their family business, not take up a stranger’s mask.”

“This from the comic book artist,” says Matt.

“Comic books are fictional,” says Byers. “You’re real.”

Matt cocks his head. “So you think I’m Daredevil?” he says. “That I took a break for six months?”

“From what I hear, you got caught in that Midland Circle mess,” says Byers, and Matt winces a little. “And you don’t have a healing factor or else I wouldn’t have had to patch you up. Even if you don’t have a sense of self-preservation, I’m pretty sure a building collapsing on you is—not exactly something you can just shrug off.”

He’s only been around Will Byers for a grand total of less than twelve hours, and already Byers figured that much out. “I’m that obvious?” he says.

“You backflipped off a fire escape right after I patched you up,” says Byers. “You probably tore my stitches too. Dick move, by the way, I worked hard on those.”

“If it helps,” says Matt, “I feel bad about ruining your stitches.”

Byers laughs, a quick, startled sound. “Not bad enough to stop,” he says, and doesn’t that sound familiar, doesn’t that sound like *Foggy*. “Hey, are you allergic to anything? There’s still some leftovers here

that I could reheat.”

“It’s fine,” says Matt, “I’m not hungry.”

“Too bad, I’m feeding you,” says Byers, taking out something that smells like chickpeas and fava beans. Falafel, thinks Matt, from that place down on Ninth. “Mom would say you’re too scrawny.”

“Your mother would maybe have something to say about letting a stranger in a mask into your home,” says Matt.

“It’s technically not my home, it’s Jonathan, Nancy and Steve’s,” says Byers. “And yeah, she would, but I’m an adult, I can make my own terrible choices.”

Matt cocks his head to the side. In the apartment, a dial turns, a timer starts, and he feels the heat from the kitchen. “At least you’re self-aware,” he concedes. “That man who tried to kidnap you—did you know him?”

“Troy,” says Byers, with a sigh. “I used to go to school with him, yeah. To tell you the truth, I didn’t even know he was in New York.”

“The city attracts all kinds of people,” says Matt. “He’s reporting to the man who had your brother and his husband kidnapped.”

“Fisk?” says Byers.

Matt grits his teeth. “Not directly,” he says. “Do you know who Billy Hargrove is?”

Byers’ heart rate climbs upwards, his pulse a fearful drumbeat in Matt’s ears. Just the name’s enough to get a reaction out of him, apparently. “Max’s stepbrother,” he says. “He hates Steve. Jonathan, too. But I thought he was in prison.” He pauses, then says, “You’re not saying—”

“A lot of people who should be in prison seem to be walking around lately, if you ask me,” says Matt, making a note. “And yes. He was involved in their disappearances.”

“*Dammit*,” says Byers, a fist thudding into the countertop. “Ow!”

"You all right?" says Matt. He didn't hear any bones breaking, so he's certain Byers will be fine, but still.

"Fine, I'm fine," Byers assures him. The timer dings and he takes out the plate. The scent of reheated falafel fills the apartment, and Matt's senses too.

His stomach growls a little. He hasn't eaten for much of today, too focused on everything else happening in his city. Foggy would've had something to say about that, he's certain. So would Matt's own mother, if she weren't in a convent out of town.

Ceramic slides against wood as Byers sets the plate down in front of him. "Wait till it's cooled down, then we can eat," says Byers. "In the meantime—Billy? You mean *Billy's* behind this?"

"Not exactly," says Matt. "Fisk is behind it, but Hargrove's an intermediary while Troy carries out the rest."

"What would Fisk want with me?" says Byers. "I can't think of any reason why he'd want to have me abducted."

"My guess is, you asking questions tripped alarms," says Matt. "The same way it did with your brother. What I'm more surprised by is that he didn't try to have you *killed*—he wants something from you."

"Again—what does he *want*?" Byers sounds frustrated now, anxiously running a hand through his hair. "Because I can't think of *anything* he or anyone he's allied with could possibly want out of me."

His heartbeat ticks up.

Lie.

"Really?" says Matt, keeping his voice somewhat interested.

Byers' hand slaps against his jeans. "Really," he lies.

Matt reaches out for a falafel ball, bites into it. Swallows. "He had your brother kidnapped," he says. "For asking questions. He could've just as easily have him and his husband killed, instead of abducted. Hell, he could've had the reporter killed as well, for asking questions.

Which leads me to wonder—why wouldn't he take the most efficient way of eliminating a potential threat? He's done it before."

"Maybe he wants something from them, first," says Byers.

"Do you have any idea what that *something* is?" says Matt. "And—be honest with me. Your brother is at risk here, and the more I know, the sooner I can find him."

Byers' breath hisses out between his teeth, as he bows his head, fingers drumming anxiously on his leg. Matt finishes off the falafel ball. "It's not something I can talk about, not with someone in a mask, and if you're trying to protect someone you love then I can't ask you to take it off," he says, quiet, and that much is true. "It's—It's huge and complicated, but I think I can tell you this much—maybe Fisk doesn't have a reason why. Maybe it's Trainer who does."

The woman Hargrove called Fisk's new girl. He doubts it, himself, but if they're working together then it's likely Trainer's stepped in a few times. "Do you have any idea why she'd go after you?" says Matt.

"The Hawkins Lab scandal, maybe, the one about the experimental toxins," says Byers, and Matt gets the sense he's skirting around something big, trying to avoid talking about it outright. "But—it's a pretty far reach."

"What does Hawkins Lab have to do with this?" says Matt.

"Nancy and Jonathan broke the story," says Byers. "*Teenager exposed to experimental toxins dies.*"

Matt smirks, a little, while Byers has his head turned away. That sounds exceedingly familiar. "Were you exposed?" he asks, before biting into another falafel ball.

Byers licks his lips. "I was," he admits, quietly. His heart still beats rabbit-quick—this isn't the truth, not entirely, but Byers already sounds like he's on the edge of *something*, if not panic. "Not—*lethal* amounts, not like Barbara, but it was—it sucked, let's leave it at that."

"You think she might be trying to get at you?" Matt presses. "To

finish the job, or something?”

“I don’t *know*,” says Byers, his voice rising half a pitch on the last word. He stands up, starts to pace, agitated. “I just know she and Fisk have my *family*, and the only real leads you gave me is that *Billy and Troy* are involved—do you even know where *they* are?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” says Matt. “Corner of 9th and 43rd—*don’t* go near there.”

“But—”

“The best course of action for you to take, right now,” says Matt, finishing off the falafel ball and standing up, trying to ignore the stabbing pain in his side, “is to go *underground*. But I doubt you’re the kind of person who’s willing to sit idly by when someone he loves is in danger, so the next best thing I can ask you to do is to *avoid* them, and take a friend with you whenever you go out. *Especially* at night.”

“You sound a little like my mom,” huffs Byers. “And my sister. And—all of my friends.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a pretty sensible friend circle,” says Matt. “You should take their advice.” He picks up the last falafel ball, starts to walk towards the window.

Byers starts forward, grabs him by the arm. “Hey, you’re not backflipping out of here *again*,” he says. “Let me take a look at the stitches you ripped. *Then* you can leave.”

“I can’t exactly stay,” starts Matt.

“My sister’s going to be at a meeting with her publisher, and it’ll take her a while, and I’m not expecting anyone else over,” says Byers. “Just sit down on the couch while I dig out medical supplies. Steve keeps a *really* well-stocked kit around.”

--

what the martyr left behind.

They drop Foggy off at the entrance to the *Bulletin*.

All right, the building that houses the *Bulletin* with some other minor businesses. One of which is a liquor store, and Foggy debates with himself over buying a bottle of good wine right here and now because, well, it'll be the last one he can afford in a while.

He decides not to. Instead he heads up to the newspaper offices, and tells the receptionist that he's Foggy Nelson, he's here for Karen Page, and is she done for the day or does she still have work to do?

Turns out Karen's not quite done for the day, because she steps out of her office with files peeking out of her bag and another in her hands and says, "Hey, Foggy—so it turns out that Trainer's company has been taken to court at least five times over damages resulting from some really shady practices, but every time she settled out of court—Foggy?"

Foggy opens his mouth, to tell her *yeah, I know that, are the complainants still around, maybe you can charm them into telling you things.*

Instead, what comes out is a hollow, "I got fired from HC-and-B."

"Oh, my god," says Karen, stuffing her file into her bag and zipping it up. "Are you—Are you all right?"

Foggy tries for a smile and says, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, I just—I just —"

I just lost everything I ever worked for, and my old babysitter's still missing, and Matt is dead.

Tears prick at the corners of his eyes. This was easier when Mike and Lucas and Max were around, because they could distract him and make him laugh, but now he's alone and everything's crashing back down on him. He reaches up to wipe them away, tries to joke, "God, it's so dusty in here, Karen, I don't know why you willingly choose to work here—"

"Oh, Foggy," says Karen, and she steps forward and ushers him out of the office, down the stairs, into an alcove. "I'm going to ask again, and I need an honest answer, this time: are you okay?"

And Foggy—

—breaks.

Six months ago Karen had sobbed into his shirt, when they knew Matt was never coming through that door. Now he's sobbing into hers, vaguely aware that he's ruining her favorite floral shirt, gripping on to her anyway. He thinks maybe he's saying words, names like *Matt* and *Midland Circle* and *Steve*, fragments like *was fired* and *got suspended* and *they're missing* and *Matt's dead* and *I don't know what to do*—

"Shh," Karen murmurs, less shushing and more just trying to comfort him, her hand warm on his back. "Shh, Foggy. You're okay. You're okay. I've got you, I'm right here."

"I can't," sobs Foggy, into her shirt. "I *can't*."

"I'm right here, Foggy. I'm not going anywhere." She sounds so *sure*. "Come on, Foggy, let's get a cab, I'll take you home."

"Can't," Foggy says, "you've—you've got things to work on, you've got a life—"

"I can work on them from your apartment, I have a laptop and a working personal hotspot," says Karen. She presses a brief kiss to the top of his head. Some part of him thinks of what might've been, what could've been, what never was. "As for a social life, most of my friends are out on assignment right now, and Nancy's missing in action. I've got all the time in the world to hang out at your place."

He breaks away from her, and looks at her, really *looks*. Karen's come a long way from the terrified, mistrustful young woman he knew, two years ago.

He's come a long way from the honest, bright-eyed lawyer he'd been two years ago, trying so hard for normal, believing that the best was yet to come. How things change, he thinks.

"Yeah," says Foggy. "Good argument."

The two of them walk out of the *Bulletin's* building. Foggy doesn't

look back.

--

theoretically.

"We need to get out of here," says Nancy, after—she's not sure how long. They've eaten twice since Steve came to, but there's really no way for her to tell the passing of the days down here, in the dim little cell they're trapped in.

Steve winces a little, looks at Jonathan, and says, "I get first crack at Hargrove, not you, Byers."

Yeah, that's—a little weird, if Nancy's being honest here. What's more worrying, though, is that Trainer's managed to kickstart psychic abilities in anyone at all. She can't help but wonder if Fisk is in this for that very reason—if he wants psychic abilities himself, or if he just wants lackeys who can, say, throw a man across the room with the power of their mind.

"He's beaten you three times now," says Jonathan, who's taking this new development in stride. "I'd rather you didn't go for a fourth. Especially not while really loud thoughts can give you a headache."

"I'm not even sure Hargrove thinks," Steve mutters, but he slumps back against the wall anyway. "Nance? What's this about getting out?"

"We need," Nancy says, "to get out of here."

"Obviously," says Steve.

"Do you have a plan?" says Jonathan.

Nancy looks at the meal slot. "Steve," she says, "what do you think's your range?"

"Um," says Steve, frowning. "I dunno. As big as our living room, maybe?"

"This cell is not that big," says Nancy. "And this door isn't lined with

lead. Can you focus on reading one person's thoughts, the way El focuses on people to track them down?"

"Theoretically, yeah," says Steve. "What are you up to?"

Jonathan pushes himself up from the wall he's leaning against. "How long has it been since the last meal?" he says.

"I'm not sure," says Nancy. "But unless they've figured out androids, someone's dropping by to feed us. Maybe, just maybe—"

"I get to test-drive on some random guy," says Steve, brightening. "And they might know *something*."

"They're not dumb enough to send the same person twice, not with Steve around," Jonathan points out. "We'll have to stay down here a while longer if we're going to go with this plan."

Steve chews on his lip and says, "The longer we're stuck here, the longer that shithhead Fisk has to ruin Dustin, and the longer Trainer has for her Hawkins Lab knockoff to really get off the ground."

That's the only con her plan has, at the moment. Well, that, and it's honestly barely even a plan, just a skeleton of one, but it's a place to start. "Then we have some time to flesh it out better," she says. "But we can't wait for El and the rest to come and save us. We need to get out of here so we can warn them."

"*Barely a plan*," Steve mutters, shaking his head. "Okay, I'm in. Just—I'm not sure how to pick out specific thoughts. Like layouts and specific names, those might just be important."

"I'm in too," says Jonathan. "You can practice on me."

"And me," says Nancy.

"What, really?" says Steve, disarmed. "I—thanks. I can't *promise* anything, but I can try." He shuts his eyes, and Nancy leans back and shuts hers too, thinks of her old family house in Hawkins—three floors, fully furnished, bedrooms and bathrooms on the second floor, living room and kitchen and dining room on the first, and the basement below, along with El's blanket fort and a door outside, to

the backyard.

Mike had insisted the fort stay up, in the year that El was gone. Every night he'd disappear into the basement, and she'd wonder if he was still looking for her, if he was still trying to keep her memory fresh in his head by visiting the blanket fort.

Is he in their apartment, right now? Is he keeping the kitchen stocked, hoping they'll come back someday? She'd left files scattered all over the coffee table, has he cleaned it up or left them there, hoping she'll come back to fix them up? She hopes to god Mike's okay. She hopes—

"I got something," Steve announces. To Nancy, he says: "You left files all over the coffee table? *Nancy*."

Nancy flicks his shoulder. "That's not a layout," she says, her heart sinking.

"Basement with blanket fort and door to the backyard, and if you went up two flights of stairs you could find a bathroom on the left," says Steve, wiping the blood coming from his nose off on his sleeve. He jerks a thumb over to Jonathan and says, "And *you* thought about your old clubhouse."

"Castle Byers?" says Nancy, frowning.

"That's the one," says Jonathan, opening his eyes. "How big is it?"

"*Tiny*," says Steve, despairing. "And full of—there were books? I think there were books on, shit, Sylvia Plath. Or was that Nancy? It got kind of muddled together near the end."

"Plath's Nancy, Will's never read her," says Jonathan. "It's a good start. Nance, what's the rest of your plan like?"

"We put the info together, and the next time someone comes by, talk to them," says Nancy. "See if we can turn them around."

"If not?" says Jonathan.

"That's what I'm still working on," says Nancy.

“Good thing we’re stuck down here, then,” says Steve, a little bit sardonic, “we’ve got all the time we need to work it out.”

15. the world i knew is broken

Summary for the Chapter:

Foggy actually laughs a little. To her, it sounds a little wet. "Those were simpler days," he says. "We were a good team, weren't we? The three of us."

"We were," says Karen, wiping away her own tears. "We were."

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Colbie Caillat's "When the Darkness Comes".

the monster in the wall.

Claire accompanies Colleen back to Jessica's office, eventually, once they're both certain the lights aren't going to start flickering wildly again.

Or, well, once Colleen's sure the lights won't start flickering again. Claire still glances upward at the ceiling, half-expecting the lights to dim any moment now, before she pulls her coat on and heads out with Colleen.

Malcolm's the only one manning the office when they get there, and he glances up at them from the book he's reading and says, "God, I can't believe I'm asking this, but—Colleen, do you know anything about dragons?"

"Uh, no," says Colleen, blinking at Malcolm, clearly caught off-guard. "Why?"

Malcolm waves a hand at Nougat's terrarium. Claire squints at Nougat, still gleefully munching on pieces of chocolate and now bits of lettuce, only now doing it with a pair of hind legs.

"So, what, is it amphibious or something?" she says.

"Nope," says Malcolm. "He doesn't *need* water. I'm not even sure if he likes it very much."

"So you think he might be a dragon?" says Colleen.

"I don't know what I think he might be," says Malcolm. "I got Trish's zoologist friend in here to tell me, and all I got was that even zoologists don't know." He shrugs. "So either he's a dragon, which I'm not really sure about, or he's a brand new species."

"I have no idea what a juvenile dragon looks like," Colleen admits, stepping closer to the terrarium and bending down. "But wouldn't they be scalier?"

"Maybe their scales haven't grown in yet," says Claire, settling into a chair. It sounds crazy even to her, and just a few hours ago Luke talked to her through the lights. "When's Jessica coming back?"

As if on cue, the door swings open and Jessica Jones steps inside, carrying a grocery bag of booze. "Claire?" she says. "Wing? What's going on here?"

"You have a new species in your apartment," Colleen informs her, "and also, Luke and Danny might be on another plane entirely."

Jessica stares at her, then at Claire.

"I swear to god I wish we were just kidding," says Claire. "But the lights in my apartment *flickered*."

"Electrical issues," says Jessica.

"That was what I thought," says Claire. "But electrical issues don't have *patterns*. They don't lead you to the phone where you can talk to your boyfriend." For a given value of talking, anyway. "And I'm pretty sure electrical issues weren't why my phone *burned* me."

Jessica crosses the room to put the booze down on her desk. "Faulty wiring in your phone," she says.

"Oh, *come on*," says Colleen. "After everything that's happened to us, can you really just chalk all of it up to, what, fucked-up wiring?"

"Sometimes the simplest explanation's the best," says Jessica, as kindly as she can. Maybe that's what hurts the most about this, because as much as her words sting, she's not trying to hurt anyone. Claire knows her well enough to know when she is honestly trying to soften the blow.

If it was under any other circumstance, she'd be touched. But this is Luke.

"And sometimes it's *not*," says Colleen, anger seeping into her voice.

"Listen, Jess," says Claire, "do you think we'd come all the way down here from Harlem if we weren't *sure* what we saw?"

Jessica huffs out a breath, leans back onto her desk. "Listen," she says, "I stalked your friend Max before I got here. Turns out, *they've* got a theory that Fisk is behind it—or at least he's behind the three Luke and Danny were looking into."

"Isn't he in *jail*?" says Colleen.

"Yeah, apparently that hasn't stopped him," says Claire, a little annoyed. Then again, Jessica's a PI, she probably should've been more specific about how to talk to her old college buddies. "Lucas already told me that, but if you ask me, I don't think Fisk has Luke and Danny. Not anymore."

"Anymore?" says Malcolm.

"The alleyway had all the hallmarks of a hastily-cleaned crime scene," says Jessica, "there was nothing in it to even *suggest*—"

And then the lightbulb above them starts to sputter.

"Oh, Jesus," Jessica mutters, pinching the bridge of her nose, "I already paid my bills, are they really going to cut me off?"

Claire looks up at the flickering light, something uneasy churning in her gut. "This isn't that," she says, and grabs the phone before Jessica can stop her. "Luke? *Luke*—"

"*Claire?!*" says Danny's voice, incredulity evident even underneath all

of the static.

“It’s for you,” Claire informs Colleen, tossing the phone to her.

In his terrarium, Nougat lets loose a shrill, unearthly wail. Claire whips around, sees Malcolm’s pet throwing itself against the glass terrarium. The glass tank rocks, as does the table under it, and Malcolm’s already out of his chair to steady the table.

“Nougat, what’s wrong?” he says, scooping his little pet out of its tank. Nougat jumps out of his hands, as the lights flicker faster and faster and *faster*, and races towards—

“Malcolm,” snarls Jessica, “I swear to god if your brand new species slimes all over my *bed*—”

“He’s not going to,” says Malcolm, before he sprints after Nougat to try and scoop it up. Claire swears, and races after him.

“Guys,” says Colleen, urgently, just behind them, “there’s a *monster*!”

“That thing gets in my bed, I’ll show you *monstrous*!”

Malcolm scoops Nougat up, only for the damn thing to squirm out of his grasp and throw itself hard enough at Jessica’s door to break the hinges off the lock. Claire, privately, starts to wonder if his theory about Nougat being a baby dragon might just be right after all.

Jessica’s door is a tight squeeze, and neither she nor Malcolm are large by any means. But squeeze through they do, and Malcolm scoops his pet up once more as it—barks? She’s not sure if it qualifies as barking, these short spurts of shrill wails it’s aiming at the wall, and the lights are still flickering and Jessica and Colleen are shouting and Malcolm is yelling *run Claire run* in the same rhythm as the beat of her heart and—

—and *something is trying to get out of the wall*.

Claire grabs the nearest heavy object: a half-full bottle of whiskey, it turns out. For once, she’s glad for Jessica keeping her alcohol around. She hurls it at the creature in the wall, struggling to break through.

Nougat *shrieks*, shrill and sharp. It's not a sound human ears are meant to hear, and it drives Claire to her knees, hands clapped over her ears to block it out.

Distantly, she hears Colleen's shout. Distantly, she hears Jessica's snarling battle cry, and the awful sound of a wall crumbling. Distantly, she hears Nougat's siren-like wail dying slowly down, until he's just chittering agitatedly in Malcolm's arms once more.

She opens her eyes. There's a new hole in Jessica's bedroom, but no creature. The lights have stopped flickering. Jessica's saying something, but there's still some ringing in her ears from Nougat's scream.

Colleen kneels at her side, a hand on her shoulder. "Claire?" she says, worriedly. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, kinda," says Claire. "What just happened?"

"That's what I'd like to know," says Jessica, as the ringing slowly dissipates. "What the *fuck* was that—that thing? And why the hell did your pet start freaking out?"

"I don't know," says Malcolm, as shaken as Claire feels, "I don't even know what *species* he is."

"He knocked down my door!" says Jessica, waving at the remains of her door. "And, again, what the hell was that *thing* in my walls?!"

"A monster," says Colleen. "Danny and Luke were fighting it, Danny said we had to run because it could smell us here." She looks at the remains of Jessica's wall and says, "You scared it off."

"Jessica is very scary," Malcolm puts in.

"Thanks," Jessica mutters, scratching the back of her neck. She walks over to Claire, holds out her hand.

"Now do you believe me?" says Claire, grabbing hold of her hand and letting Jessica haul her up to her feet. She wobbles a little, looks at Malcolm absently stroking the top of Nougat's head, as if trying to soothe it. "Although—the monster in the wall's new."

“And I *just* got the other one fixed,” Jessica grumbles.

“Oh, yeah,” says Colleen, “you might also want to get a new landline. Yours is a little—burnt.”

“God-fucking-dammit.”

--

this rinky-dink firm.

“There’s files in the cabinets you can use for your story,” Foggy had said, before trundling off to bed. “Especially stuff on Fisk and Trainer—I sort of stole a few files, on my way out.” He’d smiled a little, so brittle and sad that Karen’s heart cracked all the more for him. “No guarantees it’s substantial, or it’ll do more than just confirm what you already know, but—I thought you should know.”

Karen had thanked him, hugged him, and sent him off to bed. It had been obvious then, as it’s still obvious now, that the firing and suspension had rocked him like nothing else.

Almost like nothing else. She remembers those six months of radio silence, of Foggy drowning in work. Better that than alcohol, for a lawyer trying to work towards becoming a name partner. Wields more productive results, at the low, low cost of the few friendships you have left.

She had written some stories, while he slept. She had read the files and scribbled down notes and theories until her eyes blurred and her handwriting got shakier, then she called it a night and slept on the couch.

It’s morning when she wakes up, sees Foggy in sleep-rumpled pajamas in the kitchen/dining area, cooking something and humming to himself. Almost like normal, except when he turns to greet her with a *good morning*, he hasn’t shaven.

“Doing okay?” says Karen.

“As well as I can be, considering the circumstances,” says Foggy, depositing two omelettes onto two plates. Once upon a time, it

might've been three. "God, I hope you're not allergic to anything, because I haven't got the money to race out to buy replacements for tomatoes."

She looks around the apartment. It might've been the exact opposite of Matt's once, full of pictures and good memories, but most of them are gone now, save for the Nelson & Murdock sign hidden behind some heavy law books.

"I'm not," she reassures him, forcing the words out around the lump growing in her throat. "You, um. You kept the sign."

"It was Matt's first," says Foggy, stepping into the living room to deposit the two plates on the coffee table, mindful of the files scattered all over it. "I—I know he isn't dead yet, legally, just missing, but I couldn't—he had it in his apartment and I couldn't leave it there." He scrubs a hand over his face, breathes quietly out. "Six months. *Six months.*"

Karen's been holding on to hope for six months. They hadn't found Matt's body under the rubble, not even after days of searching. It's still there, but she half-wishes Matt were dead like Foggy's so certain he is, because if he's alive, then that means he's putting them both through this much pain for—for what? For Daredevil? For protecting Hell's Kitchen?

She reaches out a hand to slip into Foggy's, doesn't think of the things that could've been. "I still have his spare shirt," she confesses. "The one from when I was your client."

Foggy actually laughs a little. To her, it sounds a little wet. "Those were simpler days," he says. "We were a good team, weren't we? The three of us."

"We were," says Karen, wiping away her own tears. "We were."

Foggy smiles at her, his eyes shining with tears. "You were good together," he says, quiet. "I'm—I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"It's not your fault," says Karen, with a small, sad smile. "I guess it was just—shitty timing." Shitty decisions, shitty communication.

Secrets upon secrets upon secrets. Some part of her longs for the days when it was the three of them, eating soup in a new office. The rest would rather have the truth.

Maybe that's where she and Matt fell apart.

Foggy's hand is warm in hers. "Anything so far?" he asks.

"A lot, actually," says Karen, and she pulls out her notebook and starts talking. Foggy nods along with some of the theories, but he blanches a little at others and doesn't say why, which worries and frustrates her something fierce. Eventually, when she finishes up, she says, "I'm not sure, but I think I might need to look at Nancy's notes. Her perspective on this stuff could really help."

"I can call her brother up," Foggy offers. "Ask him to lend some of her notes over to me. He'll be glad to know someone else is on the case."

"Yes, please," says Karen. "And can you give him my number? Let him know he can call me at any time."

"I can try," says Foggy, "but he's not exactly the most talkative to reporters that aren't related to him." He shrugs. "It's a Hawkins Lab thing."

Karen decides not to press him further on that—she can imagine how recalcitrant Nancy's brother might be, to talk to her. She can even understand, if it stems from the Hawkins Lab scandal and the media circus that cropped up around it. Who knows, maybe once Nancy comes back, she'll ask her.

(She'll look back on this days later, after everything has come to light, and she'll think in a voice that sounds almost like Ellison's: *should've pressed harder, Page.*)

Notes for the Chapter:

I may slow down with the updates at some point during this week, bc I'll be sending my phone in for repairs. (yes I primarily write this story on my phone. I'm still surprised I haven't committed any

serious continuity errors yet. lmk if I do bc FIFTEEN CHAPTERS, all of a decent length, Holy Shit.)

also in the meantime let's all yell at Matt Murdock to please for the love of god TELL HIS BEST FRIENDS HE'S NOT DEAD.

16. i'm having the day from hell

Summary for the Chapter:

The vines try to kill them on day—who knows how long it's been.

“Not this again,” Luke grumbles, stomping out the latest attempt. If it's not the faceless monsters and dog-sized spiders coming after them, it's the plant life. He's starting to get sick of this plane.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from the Veronicas' "When It All Falls Apart".

twenty dollars.

Foggy gets the call after he and Karen finish off breakfast.

For a moment after it ends, he contemplates throwing his phone at the wall and screaming at the ceiling. Then he sighs, because phones are expensive and so are lawsuits and his bank account's been frozen, so now he has a grand total of twenty fucking dollars to his name.

For fuck's sake.

Karen bumps his shoulder as they step out of his building. “We’ll get to the bottom of this,” she says. “We’ll find out who’s framing you for all of this and we’ll clear your name, I promise.”

“Who said anything about me getting framed?” says Foggy, bitterly. “This is just my shitty luck.” He kicks a rock down the sidewalk. “I swear, this week is just out to get me.”

“Have you talked to Marci?” says Karen.

“Oh, Jesus,” says Foggy. “No. And she won’t, because right now associating with me is probably tantamount to like, career suicide or something, and I’ve already asked her to do that once.” He sighs and shakes his head. “I’m not gonna make her go looking for another job

again. She loves it at HCB, Karen.”

“They fired you on a flimsy basis,” Karen mutters darkly.

“Testimony from a cop I allegedly bribed is not that flimsy,” says Foggy.

Karen turns to look at him. “Was his name Mahoney?”

“No,” says Foggy, a little offended on Brett’s behalf. “God, no, it definitely wasn’t Brett. It was some guy, what was his name, Manolis? With a squeaky-clean record, so don’t bother digging, Hogarth already did before she called me in.”

“Maybe she didn’t dig deep enough,” says Karen.

“This is *Jeri Hogarth*,” says Foggy. “She did like, a hundred background checks on him and verified his evidence. Against that, what good’s my word?” The bitterness of his words surprises even him, but hell, it’s been that kind of week. Karen will forgive him his bitterness, because he cried his eyes out on her favorite shirt and wrinkled it holding on to her. Against that, what’s a little bitterness?

“A lot of good!” Karen insists. “There has to be something she missed, some way to cast his whole story into doubt.”

“But how exactly are you going to find it?” says Foggy. “I mean, it’s not like you can just show up to the precinct and demand to see him. He won’t talk to you, you’re biased for me *and* a reporter.”

“I can show up at HCB and demand proof,” says Karen.

“It’s an ongoing investigation, I’m pretty sure you can’t do that,” says Foggy.

“I can talk to Marci,” says Karen.

“That’s—actually not a half-bad idea,” says Foggy. “I. Should really talk to her, I guess, let her know I’m not dead or anything.” And probably figure out what foundation does their relationship stand on now, because barely speaking to someone for six months because of grief over a dead best friend and then getting fired by the boss is the

kind of thing that torpedoed an otherwise perfectly lovely arrangement. Or friendship.

Foggy's willing to lose the sex, when it comes to Marci, but he's not quite so willing to lose her friendship.

It's just—

"I just don't want to drag her into this, though," he says. "She loves it at HC-and-B, Karen. It's practically her dream job. I can't risk that."

"You sound like Matt," says Karen, as they stop at a crossing and wait for the cars to pass them by.

"He was my friend for years," says Foggy, and he just barely trips over the past tense now, "of course he's rubbed off on me."

They walk on, and if he spies a figure in black disappearing quickly from the rooftops—

He doesn't mention it to Karen. It could, after all, just be something else.

--

after this.

The vines try to kill them on day—who knows how long it's been.

"Not this again," Luke grumbles, stomping out the latest attempt. If it's not the faceless monsters and dog-sized spiders coming after them, it's the plant life. He's starting to get sick of this plane.

Danny, slumped against a wall, isn't exactly doing so hot either. He's paler than usual, maybe because the last monsters they had to fight off almost got past Luke, and Danny had to activate his Iron Fist to fend them off. Bad idea, overall—this place has been messing with Danny something fierce, even worse than it's messing with Luke.

Hell, at least Luke's quicker to bounce back than most from a monster attacking him, even if this place is making him feel a little woozy too. Must be something in the air, the water, the food they're eating.

Whatever it is, it's worse on Danny. He's a little paler than he should be, and he keeps talking about how the chi on this place doesn't work right, how it's all backwards.

He hauls Danny up to his feet. The man sways a little, and leans on him, but they both walk out of the empty bar. Even here, the neon lights still flicker, but in New York it's just—neon lights, bright red against the night. Here, in this washed-out copy, there's nothing red about the sign, and it gives off a strange glow that Luke doesn't like.

"We could go to Colleen's," says Danny, quietly. "Maybe it's safer there."

"I said that about Claire's and Jessica's," Luke reminds him. "That thing and its buddies found us both times anyway."

And the thing had very nearly torn its way into Jessica's bedroom. Luke isn't so keen on any more repeats, not until Danny's better, not until they can keep the monsters off their backs for longer than a few hours. They've been catching naps in shifts, too uneasy to sleep for more than one hour in most places.

This whole plane is out to kill them, Luke's sure about that.

Terribly rude of it, considering it sucked them in first.

"I used to play this game with Joy, when I was a kid," says Danny, all of a sudden, as the two of them more or less limp down the sidewalk. "We called it After This. We'd just say what we were going to do after we did whatever we were already doing—like, after I read this book I'm going to watch *Power Rangers*. Or, after I eat dinner I'm going to eat all the M&M's in my secret stash. After the plane touches down in New York, we're going to go get ice cream."

"Sounds nice," says Luke.

"I keep thinking about it," says Danny. "What I want to do, after all of—this." He waves a hand vaguely at the empty buildings, the vines, the street lamps giving off an eerie glow. "After we get out of here, I'm going with Colleen, and we're going to see that movie she's been dying to see."

"After we get out of here," Luke says, contemplatively, "I'm going for coffee with Claire."

"Catch up on all the shows I missed while I was in K'un-Lun," says Danny. "Apparently *Power Rangers* has a new movie out?"

"It's been out since last year," huffs Luke. "But yeah—Nas is on that new mixtape that came out, the one about the Founding Father. After this, think I'm gonna pick that one up."

"After this, I might head upstate," says Danny, "there's a lake I used to love swimming in, you and Claire and Colleen would love it."

"I kinda suck at swimming," says Luke, turning the corner and finding the public library. He pushes the doors open, and he and Danny freeze in place.

There's a web. There's a web surrounded by skeletal remains, of dogs and cats and people, and sitting in the midst of it is a glossy, slimy spider-like creature the size of a large dining room table. It's tearing into something that it's cocooned in silky white strands. Flesh hangs out of the corpse and drops off with a *plop* onto the floor.

Sweet Christmas, thinks Luke. He doesn't dare say it out loud.

The spider looks up at them and *hisses*.

Luke picks up Danny and sprints as far away from the library as possible, the giant spider hot on their tails.

17. get around this mess

Summary for the Chapter:

“Still nothing?” says Mike, as Jane yanks the blindfold off and throws it down on the coffee table.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Safetysuit's "Get Around This".

the sergeant.

Matt heads down to the precinct, the first to get there this time. Manolis is a vaguely familiar name to him—Sergeant Nick Manolis had been at some of the Punisher's crime scenes, a friendly man who seemed to get along fine with most people, Brett Mahoney among them.

Then again, just because someone's friendly doesn't mean they aren't hiding something. Matt perches on a rooftop low enough to allow him to hear the voices below without straining too much, but high enough that no one will easily spot him. It helps that he picks the coolest spot, which must be the most shadowed as well.

He cocks his head and listens to the precinct below him. There's Detective Smith, complaining the coffeemaker's broken again. There's Lieutenant Gardner, talking to himself as he pins up the latest news on the bulletin board. There's Brett, talking to his mother on the phone, *I tried his number three months ago, bigshot lawyer's just too important for me now, I guess.*

Matt purses his lips.

Then Brett says, “Oh, Manolis! How's the kid?”

Manolis' heart rate jumps. “He's all right, Mahoney,” he manages, but his heart is thumping hard and fast in his chest. Lie, lie, lie. “Anyway, I'm heading out for a smoke. Want anything from outside?”

“Get me a Snickers bar,” Brett says, oblivious to the role Manolis

played in ruining Foggy's life. Matt's fingers curl into fists.

Manolis steps out of the precinct, into the alleyway where he'd broken a police officer's arm once. His heartbeat's still pounding in Matt's ears as Matt descends from rooftop, silent as a mouse. Still pretty damn loud to Matt's ears, but it's not like his hearing's a reliable marker of loudness.

Manolis' phone rings. He startles badly, and answers: "H-Hello?"

Matt has to strain a little to better hear the voice, and his blood runs cold at the words: "*Did you do as asked?*" He doesn't recognize the voice, but it's a woman's voice, and he wonders if this is the elusive Carolyn Trainer.

"Yes," says Manolis. "Yes—is he okay? Is my boy okay?"

"*He's in the greatest care,*" says the woman.

"That's what you said, Miss Trainer," says Manolis, agitated. "Last time I called you *said* that, but that doesn't tell me *anything*. Is my little boy okay? Please—"

"*He's all right,*" says Trainer. "*For now. And he will continue to be as long as you do what Mr. Fisk says, Lieutenant.*"

"Y-You're fixing him, right? Those powers he has—they won't hurt him anymore?" Manolis' fear comes through in his voice, fear for his son, for himself. Make a deal with the devil, Matt thinks, and you spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder. "My boy, he'll be okay?"

"*Your son will be fine,*" says Trainer. "*We are doing everything we can to make things—comfortable for him. But we only have so many resources to spare.*"

And as long as Manolis cooperates with Fisk and Trainer, his son will be near the top of the priority list. But Matt hears the threat underneath as well: Manolis stops cooperating, and his boy rapidly falls to the bottom, and maybe even off the list.

Matt grits his teeth. The worst part of this is, he can understand

Manolis' reasons. God knows, his own father had been in that position himself, taking care of a recently-blinded son. If someone had come along offering to pay for Matt's hospital bills, Jack might've considered the offer.

But Manolis had taken it, and gotten in bed with someone he shouldn't have as a result. And now his son's being used as leverage against him.

It's awful. It's sickening.

It's exactly the kind of thing Fisk would do, so Matt isn't surprised.

He waits for the call to end and for Manolis to stuff his phone back into his pockets. Fingers fumble with a carton of cigarettes, and Manolis curses as one cigarette falls out of the pack.

Matt hits the ground, making sure to land heavier than he should. Manolis gasps, and the carton falls from his nerveless fingers.

"Daredevil," says the sergeant, terror in his voice.

"Sergeant Manolis," Matt coolly says.

"Oh, god," says Manolis, "oh, *god*—look, whatever it is, I haven't—I haven't done anything to anyone, I swear—"

Lie. Not only that, but it's a confirmation Manolis hadn't seen him, hadn't even realized he was there to hear. Matt's lips pull back over his teeth, in a cold smile. "Funny," he says, "considering I just heard you having a very interesting conversation."

Manolis' heart rate goes straight through the roof.

"H-How interesting?" he asks, the tips of his fingers brushing against his shirt.

Matt moves first before Manolis' gun is even completely out of the holster, and in a flash, he's cracked the sergeant's wrist and kicked the gun aside. He shoves him up against a wall.

"Franklin Nelson, Sergeant," Matt says, voice low. "What did Fisk ask

you to do to him?”

“I don’t—oh, god, I can’t tell you, they’ll *hurt* him, they’ll hurt my son —”

“I just need to know,” Matt says, “what did he *ask*?”

“Nick?” comes Brett’s voice. “Jesus, Manolis, what’s taking you so long?” His footsteps draw close.

Bad timing. *Horrible* timing, in fact. Matt purses his lips and lets go of Manolis, and clambers back up. Below him, he hears Brett’s shout, Manolis’ babbling, the alarmed cries of police officers. Someone tries to fire a gun in his direction, but the bullet simply dings off a metal rung.

Matt’s over on the next street before he lets himself slow to a stop, scurrying into a shadow once more. Great. He’s getting rusty at this, and he can’t count on Brett Mahoney to give him information this time. The man just saw him running away from a police officer that he injured.

He’s going to have to go at this from another angle.

--

blinded me with science.

When Jonathan wakes up, he’s not in the cell anymore.

Instead, he’s in a grey interrogation room, with a woman in a grey suit for company. She smiles blandly at him, but there’s something calculating in the sweep of her grey eyes over him. The only burst of color in this whole room is her dyed blonde hair, cut to curl just above her jawline, and her dark green vest.

“Oh, good,” says Carolyn Trainer. “You woke up. Your wife was insistent I take her instead, though I’ve found not even the best reporters can argue with a strong sedative.”

Jonathan nearly starts out of his chair, but leather cuffs bring him up short. “If you’ve hurt Nancy and Steve—” he snarls.

"Oh, you need not worry, they're fine," says Trainer. "Harrington—well, he's reacting much better than I thought he would to those abilities. Better than my other subjects did. And still do."

White-hot fury burns in Jonathan's chest, all the more for that he can't fucking *do anything*. Other subjects? "You've been doing this to *others*?" he snarls.

"Well, yes," says Trainer, and god, does Jonathan want to strangle her. He hasn't wanted to do that since, fuck, *Brenner*. "What good are Harrington's results if I don't have anything else to compare them to? Besides, it's admirable. He managed to *survive*."

"You *monster*—"

"I prefer visionary, thanks," says Trainer.

"You work with a crime lord!" says Jonathan.

"A very small-minded one," says Trainer. "But I understand his motives. I can't say the idea of Eleven—"

"Jane, her name's Jane, she's a *person*," Jonathan interrupts, furious now, uncaring if he chafes his wrists raw and bloody, "and you don't get to call her that. You, of *all people*, don't have the right."

"—*Eleven* having to face the consequences for her part in my uncle's failure doesn't excite me a little," Trainer continues, "because it *does*."

"Then you're a monster who sucks at comprehending what really happened," says Jonathan, "because if your uncle's who I think it is, he fucked up all on his own right at the start by kidnapping kids and treating them like *lab experiments*."

"Weren't they?" says Trainer.

"They are *not*," snaps Jonathan. "They were all just kids, for fuck's sake! And now, what, you're starting it over again, and this time you're just—abducting people from off the street!"

"Not always," says Trainer, sounding truly offended. "Some of them

volunteer.”

“Who’d volunteer to be experimented on?!”

Trainer lifts her chin and smiles. “Captain America, for example,” she says, “because he wanted to serve his country, and an experimental procedure was the only way to guarantee it.” She steepled her fingers. “See, Erskine’s failure was that he was—*ethical*. He let his concern for the well-being of his subject get in the way of a scientific breakthrough, and he forgot to write everything down too. My uncle, he didn’t have to worry about ethical concerns, not when secrecy was so guaranteed, but *he* was tied to serving his country. A patriot through and through, as I’m sure you no doubt saw.”

“What I saw,” says Jonathan, fingernails biting into his palms, “was a man who kidnapped a little girl, turned her into a lab experiment for all of her childhood, and then had the *gall* to be pissed when she called him out on it. What I saw was a man who would sell his *family* for a shot at glory.” He barks out a mirthless laugh. “I can see the family resemblance,” he says.

“I am building on his research, yes,” Trainer acknowledges. “But he served his country, first and foremost, and I think we can both agree how shortsighted that was. Sometimes this country just doesn’t appreciate the service you give it.” She sighs, theatrically, and leans back into her chair. “So—I look towards the future. I look towards *profit*, and *glory*, and, I’ll admit, a little bit of revenge.”

“How much profit do you think you’re going to get when word gets out you worked with a crime lord?” Jonathan asks.

“You’ve seen politicians lately?” says Trainer, raising an eyebrow. “Get off that high and mighty horse of yours, Byers, and see how the real world works sometime. You and your wife and Harrington.”

“I’m a photographer, Trainer, and Nancy’s a reporter,” says Jonathan. “We’ve seen more of the real world than you have, up in your ivory tower.” He looks at the mirror, then back at Trainer. “Why did you bring me here? Just to gloat? Just to tell me what your motives were, like some—classic super villain?”

"I was leading up to something, Mister 'Ivory Tower'," says Trainer, her bland smile vanishing. Ah, so that has gotten to her after all. Some part of him wonders why that stung enough for her to remark on it. "And I brought you here because I know about Will. I know about his trip into the Upside Down." She leans in closer and says, "And I know he didn't leave it completely behind. And neither did Eleven."

Will and El.

Oh, god, *Will and El*.

"Don't you fucking *touch them*," Jonathan snarls, the chains rattling as he starts out of the chair again. At this rate he'll be bleeding, but he doesn't care, she *threatened Will*. "You go anywhere near them and I *swear*—"

"I won't touch them," says Trainer. "Fisk is, though. He's obsessed with that lawyer, what's his name? Dusty? Franklin? And he has this incredible aversion to people asking questions they shouldn't. I guarantee you, he wants your brother dead—but I asked him nicely to settle for kidnapped." She grins. "Isn't it fun when the crime lord you're working with happens to have a goal that aligns quite well with yours?"

Fucking *Fisk*. "So you dragged me here to tell me all of that?" says Jonathan. "*Why?*"

"Because I can tell him to back off," says Trainer, "at least for the moment." She sighs and rests her chin on her fingers. "Your brother is—something of a unique variable, a wildcard, if you will, and if we're being perfectly honest here, I haven't quite finished everything just yet. The gate is barely even stable, it keeps opening smaller gates all over the city." She shrugs. "You tell me where he is. You tell me the things he can do, especially pertaining to the Upside Down. I can then tell Fisk to ease off of him, until the time is right."

Smaller gates—like the one Nancy had gotten sucked into, when Will had disappeared.

Wait.

"You're trying to open a gate to the *Upside Down*?!" Jonathan snaps. "That's why all the psychics. You want someone with El's powerset! Someone *you* can control! And—this isn't Hawkins, this isn't some small, sleepy town, this is *New York*."

"Exactly," says Trainer. "Hawkins isn't used to this, it's why there was such a scandal. For New York, this happens all the time."

"How many more people are you going to sacrifice for your stupid, senseless quest?" Jonathan says.

The temperature in the room practically *drops*.

"Stupid?" says Trainer, evenly, with just enough restraint that Jonathan realizes that *she's* barely resisting the urge to kill *him*.

"Yeah," says Jonathan, holding her steel-grey gaze and finding his lips curling into a cold smile. "That's what all this is. *Stupid*."

"So I suppose that we're at an impasse," she says. "You won't tell me about Will?"

"Unlike this bullshit MK-ULTRA ripoff with even less common sense than the last one," says Jonathan, "I'm not stupid enough to know you're just trying to feed me bullshit. You *want* Will, you said as much. And you mad scientist types, you love what you call *unique variables*. If I told you anything about him, you'd use it against him. Same with El, before you ask."

He lifts his chin and smiles at her. It's the same kind of smile he's seen Nancy give to the lawyers who sometimes come around, trying to file lawsuits against her for doing her job. It's the same kind of smile Steve used to wear, when he was king of Hawkins High, the reckless little grin that says *come on, then, if you think you're tough enough*.

"You and Fisk," says Jonathan, "can go to hell."

Trainer grits her teeth. She says, coolly, "Then I guess that means we're done." She nods to the two-way mirror, and a man opens the door, wielding a syringe. "Take him back to Wheeler," she says.

"There is one thing I want to say, though," says Jonathan, about Will. "He's *good* at hiding—so good luck, trying to find him. After all," he glances at the man, now approaching, "New York's a pretty big place."

The last thing he sees before the world goes dark once more is Trainer's steel-grey eyes, narrowed in a glare.

The last thing he *feels* is satisfaction.

After all—he's got something new to tell Nancy and Steve, when he wakes back up in their cell. Then they can draw up better plans for an escape.

--

good at finding.

"Still nothing?" says Mike, as Jane yanks the blindfold off and throws it down on the coffee table, so frustrated she's almost crying with it. They've all slept at the Wheeler-Harrington-Byers apartment, unwilling to let the apartment fall prey to any criminal element lurking around in New York.

Well, all of them slept there except for Dustin, who had gone back home the day before. It's a little bit concerning that he hasn't called yet, but Jane supposes he's got other things on his mind, like looking for another job.

"Not a thing," she says, burying her face in her hands and trying to hold back the tears. "I can't—I can't *focus* on them, it's like they slip out of my grasp every time I try." She looks up at Mike. "And before you ask, yes, I've tried tracking everyone else. I can still reach those, I still know where Joyce and Hop are, but Nancy and Jonathan and Steve—I can't *find* them." *I'm sorry*, she doesn't say, can't say, but god. She feels like a failure. Look at her, getting up early and trying so damn *hard* and getting nothing in return, nothing but static and a picture in her hand and tears staining the blindfold.

"It's okay," says Mike, sitting down next to her and depositing homemade waffles in front of her. They're almost as good as Eggos,

but she's not going to admit that now, is she. He wraps an arm around her shoulder, tugs her closer. She rests her head on his shoulder, wipes away the blood from her nose with a tissue. "We can find them the old-fashioned way."

"New York covers an area of three hundred square miles," says Jane.

"And there's six of us, and we've got a missing persons report filed, and we're putting posters up, and we're getting in the papers," says Mike, listing off each item on his fingers. "We're not going to be the only ones looking for them. It's not solely your responsibility to look, El."

Which is—right, damn it. She scrubs a hand over her eyes. "I know, Mike, I know," she says. "It's just—I don't even know where they are, not exactly, not the way I know where you guys are, or where Joyce and Hop are. I don't know *how* they are, besides alive." And she doesn't know how long they'll stay that way. "I'm worried for them."

"I am too," says Mike, fingers picking idly at his pants. "Really worried. I just wish—I just want Nancy to come home and be angry that we messed up her files. I want Jonathan to worry about the chemicals in the darkroom and his pictures and if they developed at all. I want Steve to call us shitheads again and make us pancakes."

"Steve makes second best pancakes," Jane says.

"That he does," says Mike. "They'll come back. I—"

"Don't promise that," she says. "Not when you don't know for sure."

"I do know for sure," says Mike. He even sounds convinced. She supposes he has convinced himself, because it's that or drown in worry for the three of them. Then he pauses, drums his fingers on the coffee table.

"What is it?" says Jane.

"It's just, I don't know, it's just a thought," he starts, "but—you know Luke Cage and Danny Rand?"

"Hero of Harlem and the billionaire who came back from the dead?"

says Jane, scratching lightly at the side of her head. “Yeah. Why?”

“They went missing when they started looking for Steve, Jonathan and Nancy,” says Mike. “Maybe—you can look for them.”

Jane turns the idea over in her mind, looks at it from all angles.

She says, “Do you have pictures of either of them?”

18. upside down you're turning me

Summary for the Chapter:

"I got fired," says Foggy.

Brett sits up straighter. "What?"

"I got fired and my license got suspended because someone from your precinct said I was bribing people," says Foggy.

Notes for the Chapter:

title from Diana Ross's "Upside Down".

the high life.

As much as Foggy very badly wants to hit Josie's up and just stay there for the rest of the day, there's still a lot of things he has to do.

Find Steve, for one thing. The guy's saved his ass more times than he can count, back in Hawkins, and Foggy owes him one at least, if not more. Besides, Steve's—a good friend, an old friend, a party member. And if a party member requires assistance, then the party has to render it.

For another, talk to Brett. He's—not entirely sure how to accomplish that, without immediately getting the stink-eye from literally every police officer in the precinct and possibly running into Manolis. He could text the guy, but that would be more than a little bit suspicious.

He tells this to Karen, once they've made it to her favorite café in Hell's Kitchen. She laughs, and calls Brett herself, because of course she's got Brett on speed dial.

"You're an angel, Karen," says Foggy, once she's done and they've found a table.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Foggy," Karen shoots back, but she's

grinning at him. It's just like old times, and for half a heartbeat he almost turns to talk to Matt.

But Matt isn't there. Never will be again.

He looks back at Karen. She takes his hand, strokes along the knuckles, a gesture of sympathy and shared loss.

He's missed that. He hasn't—It's been months, and he's out of practice with this feeling of camaraderie. He's been shaking off most of the rust, over the past few days, but Karen's gentle, pen-calloused fingers in his hand is—it's something.

Brett walks inside, taking his hat off and grumbling about lawyers and cigars, making a beeline for the counter. Foggy's hand slips out of Karen's, and rises up to wave Brett over once he's finished his order.

"Miss Page," says Brett politely, as he pulls up a chair. He looks at Foggy, and frostily says, "Mr. Nelson. Finally decided to show your face 'round here, huh? I thought you were enjoying the high life now."

Foggy stares at him. He's joking, right? He must've already found out. *Manolis works with him* for crying out loud, he must've said something.

"Something between my teeth?" says Brett.

"I got fired," says Foggy.

Brett sits up straighter. "What?"

"I got fired and my license got suspended because someone from your precinct said I was bribing people," says Foggy.

"Always knew you going around trying to charm your way into people's hearts with Cuban cigars was gonna end badly for you," Brett grumbles, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Seems like a pretty hefty punishment though, for some cigars."

"It isn't just the cigars," says Karen, and she gives Brett the Cliff's

Notes version of Foggy's shitshow of a life for the past few days. Foggy watches Brett's face, sees incredulity and shock and horror pass over his features as Karen talks, and then looks back down at his coffee and pours another spoonful of sugar into it, stirs and stirs and stirs.

"Well, fuck," says Brett, once Karen's finished. "And on top of all of this, Harrington's missing?"

"Yep," says Foggy, looking up. "You—didn't know about any of this?"

"I knew about the Wonder Trio going missing, Byers the younger came by two precincts with one of your old buddies to file the report," says Brett, "but nothing about the rest of it. Jesus, Foggy." He sighs, fumbles in his jacket pockets for something before he comes up with a great big pile of nothing. "Of all times to leave that flask at home," he mutters.

"I didn't do it, Brett," says Foggy. "You know that, right?"

"The allegation about Daredevil, yeah, I can believe, you're not subtle about being connected to him," says Brett, "but the rest of it? You're less threatening than my mom's cupcakes." He spears a lettuce leaf on his fork. "But what I can't figure out is: why you? Why now? Why sit on these pictures? Daredevil's been dead for months. You'd think they'd have been broken earlier." He pauses, then narrows his eyes at Foggy and says, "Unless—"

"Believe me, when Hogarth showed them to me, that was the first time I heard of them too," says Foggy. "Think the point of blackmail's to make the person pay you to *not* release incriminating evidence. That kind of requires getting into contact first."

"Whoever's framed Foggy, they're not interested in getting paid to *not* release it," says Karen. "They just want to ruin his reputation."

"Doing a damn good job of it, too," says Foggy. "But just—why now? Why not earlier, when I got hired, or later, before I could make partner? The timing's just the worst."

"Is that what you're worried about?" says Brett. "Timing?"

"I'm worried about plenty of things," says Foggy, rubbing at his eyes. "My shitshow of a life just—kind of pales right now. Steve's missing."

"And Murdock?" says Brett, eyes flicking between the two of them. Goddammit. Of course Brett would figure something's up about Matt's disappearance, but—what's Foggy supposed to tell him? *We just filed Matt as missing but we know he's dead because he died in Midland Circle because he's Daredevil, Brett, pass the croutons.*

"It's been six months," says Foggy, heavily, slumping into his chair. "I don't even know if he's still alive."

"He is," says Karen, with the conviction Foggy doesn't quite feel. "I know that he is, I just—I just wish I knew where he was. At this point I'd even take a ransom note of some kind, if it meant he was still alive."

Six months, and she still hopes he's alive. Six months, and she still thinks he'll walk through the door, or climb through the window. Six months, and Foggy's so tired of keeping this charade up, pretending he doesn't know exactly where Matt is—under the rubble of Midland Circle.

He shuts his eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose. Matt is dead, and there's a Daredevil copycat running around. And: "Right now there's still a bigger possibility that Steve's still alive," he says. "Nancy and Jonathan, too. I'm—focusing on that, right now." Because if he looks at anything else, especially at the rapid cascade of shit onto every other aspect of his life, he's pretty sure he'll have another breakdown. "But I. Really would appreciate knowing more about Manolis."

"Not much to talk about there," says Brett. "Manolis is clean as a whistle, stayed on at the precinct when half the force went to jail 'cause of Fisk. He has been acting a little weird lately, something about his kid—don't know all the details, but word 'round the precinct's that the kid's real sick."

"With what, exactly?" says Karen.

"That's the thing, no one knows," says Brett, shaking his head. "He's not someone to talk about his problems with the rest of us."

“Do you think,” Foggy starts, thinking of Joyce Byers, “that if someone threatened his kid, he’d do what they asked? No matter how illegal?”

“I don’t know what to think,” says Brett. “Sure as hell didn’t think he’d finger you for criminal misconduct, of all people. You barely even know each other.” He sighs, drums his fingers on the table. “But then again, I also didn’t think Daredevil would be coming back from the dead to break his wrist.”

“*What?*” says Foggy.

“Is this the copycat again?” says Karen, tiredly.

“There’s *another* of those devil-worshippers?” Brett asks. “Because all I know is, man in black assaulted Manolis on his smoke break and broke his wrist. God only knows why.”

“Did the man in black say anything?” says Foggy.

“If he did, sure as hell the sergeant’s not saying anything,” says Brett. “But if you ask me, personally? Whoever broke Manolis’ wrist, he runs around just as well as Daredevil did. You should’ve seen him jumping around.”

Foggy’s fingers curl around his cup of coffee. He looks at Karen, who’s writing furiously in her notebook, pen scratching against the paper. He looks at Brett, who’s frowning at him like Foggy’s a puzzle he’s trying to figure out.

“It can’t be Daredevil,” says Foggy, out loud. “It just can’t.”

“You sure about that?” says Brett.

“I’m sure,” says Foggy.

Because if it is Daredevil, and if it is Matt under that mask, then—

It’s been six months. If Matt’s still alive, he would’ve said something by now.

Right?

--

listen.

Jane ties the blindfold around her face, takes Mike's hand, and concentrates on the newspaper pictures in her other hand: one with Luke Cage, the other with Danny Rand. They might not be the most ideal for the job, but they'll do in a pinch.

When she opens her eyes, she's in the Void once more, water underneath her bare feet. She turns, and sees Cage, slumbering beside a twitching Rand. Both of them look terrible, like they haven't slept very much in days, and Rand especially looks awful, paler than he should be.

He *feels* awful to Jane too, in a way that surprises even her. It's as if he's radiating some kind of—wrongness, somehow. Or—

Or *rightness*, but everything around him feels *wrong*. A stronger feeling than—

Than when she saw Will in the Upside Down.

It clicks, then and there. Rand is as pale as Will had been in the Upside Down, because he and Cage are *there*. She gulps, looks briefly around her, but she doesn't spy any monster lurking about, waiting to pounce. They're safe for now.

She kneels down, reaches out a hand. Her fingers brush against Rand's hairline, smoothing back some stray curls. He hasn't shaved in a while, she thinks. Days, maybe.

Rand startles awake, snarls, "Who's there?! Who are you?!"

"Relax," she says. "Listen—Listen to me, Mr. Rand."

Rand struggles to his feet, almost collapses even once he's standing. "Show yourself!" he shouts, frantic. The wrongness-rightness of him intensifies, and she realizes he's doing—something, she doesn't know *what*. Trying to summon some kind of power?

"Mr. Rand, calm down!" snaps Jane. "I'm a friend, I'm not going to

hurt you. Please, you need to listen to me—”

Cage groans, opens his eyes. “Danny,” he says, quietly, hoarsely, parched the same way Will was days into his own stay in the Upside Down, “sweet Christmas, Danny, do you *want* to call that thing down on us?”

“I—” starts Rand, looking a little abashed. He turns away from Jane, and she reaches out to try and catch his attention once more.

He turns to dust. So does Cage before Jane can grab him, and she swears as the dust swirls away from her. Distantly, she can hear Mike calling her back, worried now for the anger in her voice, and she takes hold of his voice as though it’s an anchor and lets it pull her back out of the Void.

“Are you all right?” says Mike, worriedly, as Jane flings the blindfold off once more.

“I’m fine,” she says, shortly, standing up and beginning to pace, running her hands through her hair. “I found them. Cage and Rand, I mean.”

“Oh, that’s good news,” says Mike, picking up a fork so he can spear a piece of pancake. “We can tell Jessica where they are—”

“They were in the Upside Down,” says Jane. “And there’s a monster after them.”

Mike stares at her in shock, his jaw slack, his fork clattering to the floor.

“We need to wake up the others,” he says, after a moment, his face turning hard and serious. “And we need to call Dustin.”

19. learn to see the forest for the trees

Summary for the Chapter:

She looks up at the ceiling and calls, “Danny? Luke? Are you guys there?”

For a minute, there’s no response. Claire’s just about to turn away when the lamps hum to life.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Huey Lewis and the News' "Forest for the Trees".

over.

“I swear to god if I’m getting this call because of—tax evasion or something—”

“Have you been evading taxes lately,” says Lucas, with a huff, as he leans on the balcony and looks out at the New York traffic below him. On the other end of the line, he hears Dustin breathe a sigh of relief.

“No, but at this point I’m pretty sure I’ll get accused of that anyway, that’s how badly my life’s been going lately,” says Dustin. “Brett says hi, by the way, and also you still owe him five dollars.”

“Pretty sure I already paid him back,” says Lucas. “You tell him that, by the way.”

“He’s like, just a pane of glass away, you can tell him yourself right now,” says Dustin. “Oh, I was actually just about to call you guys. Is Mike up? My friend Karen says she wants to help with Nancy’s story, she just needs the files and her notes to work her magic.”

Karen Page, Nancy’s reporter friend. The same person as Dustin’s old secretary friend, and isn’t that funny. “Yeah, Mike’s up, but he and El are doing stuff,” says Lucas. “Things. You know.”

“Let me guess,” says Dustin, sounding a little more amused and a little less worn down, *“rampant displays of affection over Eggos.”*

Lucas smiles a little to himself, wishing he hadn't been the one to draw the short straw. Then he sighs, and says, “Strategizing.”

“Oh, for finding Steve, Jonathan and Nancy?” says Dustin. *“Did you guys find them? Oh, god—”*

“We haven't found them yet,” says Lucas. “There's still some kind of psychic blocker in place that's keeping El from finding them. But she did find Luke Cage and Danny Rand.”

“That's good, I can tell Jessica—”

“They're in the Upside Down,” says Lucas, ripping the band-aid off. For a few moments, Dustin's horribly, uncharacteristically silent.

Then he says, *“Jesus fucking Christ.”*

“Yeah, I said the same thing,” says Lucas, rubbing at his temples. “Will's been pacing since El told us. We're planning on going to that alleyway Jessica mentioned—you coming?”

“First of all, how would you know which alleyway she was talking about?” says Dustin. *“This is New York, there's like a million of those. Second of all, please tell me this isn't going to be like the first night we went looking for Will.”*

“Nothing happened to us that time,” Lucas says, with a little indignant huff. “And we found El!”

“Yeah, we got lucky that time,” says Dustin, *“considering we were three kids who had no weapons, no back-up, and no idea what we were walking into.”*

Lucas can't help the chuckle that bubbles out past his lips. There's the Dustin he'd known, advocating the most practical option. He's missed him, missed hanging out with him, and he honestly can't believe that it's taken Nancy, Jonathan and Steve going missing for Dustin to fall back into the party's orbit. “We've got El this time,” he says. “Also, brass knuckles, pepper spray, Mace, a couple of baseball bats, Steve's

spiked bat, and Max may have taken a spare handgun from Nancy's safe."

"Please tell me you're all going to avoid the police if you're carrying all that on you," says Dustin. *"I can't come haul your asses out of trouble now."*

"Of course we're going to," says Lucas, a little offended. "What do you think we are, amateurs?"

"The worst part of this is," huffs Dustin, *"I know for a fact that we're not."*

"So you're coming with?" says Lucas.

"Yeah, of course," says Dustin. *"Seeing as you're all about to put yourselves at risk again, someone's got to come with you, keep everyone's asses from getting eaten by a demodog."*

"Bite me, Dustin," says Lucas, fondly, "if anything, you'd probably be the first to get eaten by a demodog."

"I'm not that delicious," says Dustin, with a snort of laughter. *"Hey, just a suggestion, but: Jessica's going to want to know we found them. Do you want to let her in on everything?"*

Lucas rests his arm on the balcony's railing, eyes briefly darting around the streets for a flash of dark hair, a woman in a leather jacket. "Max had a point," he says. "No matter how much you trust her, the fact remains that she stalked us. I *know* it's her job, before you start, but she's—"

"Weird?" says Dustin.

Lucas bites back a sigh, but since Dustin isn't here, he doesn't bother to stop himself from rolling his eyes upward.

"You're rolling your eyes, I can tell," says Dustin.

"She's an asshole," says Lucas. "Also, none of us know if she *can* be trusted with—all of it."

"I do." There's a muffled noise, somewhere in the background, a woman asking a question, and Lucas can't quite make out the words making up Dustin's response to her. *"Jessica's not a bad person when you get to know her. And you voted for letting her in a little, so."*

"That was before we knew Luke Cage and Danny Rand were in the Upside Down," says Lucas. "Do you really want to risk her life and put her in the middle of a danger she might not be able to survive, Dustin? *Do you?*"

It's a low blow, he knows, using Dustin's own reasoning against him. Sure enough, he hears Dustin's breath hiss out over the phone, before his friend says, *"Okay. Fine. But she needs to at least hear we've got a lead that we're following up on."*

"That's fine," says Lucas. "As long as you tell her not to stalk us anywhere."

"I'll let her know," says Dustin, *"but I'm just going to warn you, right here and now: Jessica's likely not to give a shit what I ask her, considering it's her friends in danger."*

The worst part of this is, Lucas has been in that exact same position. He knows she's not going to back off, not if the people she cares for are in danger—he's done much the same for Will, and El, and Max.

"Just let her know we've got this," says Lucas, because it's the best assurance he can think to give. It's not a good one, either—after all, he hadn't thought the police had *got this* when Will was missing. "Over and out."

"This isn't a walkie-talkie, Christ," Dustin mutters, loud enough for Lucas to hear, but he adds, *"I'll call you back once I've talked to her. Over and out."*

--

o, christmas lights.

Claire buys dozens of strings of Christmas lights, and lightbulbs, and a few new lamps, and a lot of extra outlets. She hangs up some of the strings in her apartment, puts the lamps in the living room within

distance of her electrical outlets. She'll be running up the charges on her bill for the month, she's sure, but she can't not try.

She tries talking to Luke again. Nothing happens, and she packs up the remaining boxes and heads to Colleen's dojo—apparently closed, but once Claire knocks on the door, Colleen answers, with dark circles under her eyes.

"You need any help with that?" says Colleen, eyeing the boxes.

"We need to have a way of talking with Luke and Danny," says Claire.

Colleen stares at her for a moment, then she opens the door all the way and lets her inside, picking up some of the boxes herself. "I've got a few extra Christmas lights around," she says.

"String them up," says Claire, setting up lamps in unobtrusive places. She's made sure these lamps are battery-powered, aren't tall enough to get toppled over by a stray kick or a punch.

"I have a better idea," says Colleen. "I've also got a can of black paint around here, and there's a room there we can use that's roomy enough." She waves a hand to the space separated from the rest of the dojo by a Japanese-style curtain.

So Claire strings up the lights, and Colleen paints letters underneath. All in all, it's a pretty good set-up.

It's also a crazy-looking set-up. Claire glances briefly at the curtain. "Do you think—" she starts.

"No one's going to see this," says Colleen. "I don't tend to let my students in here, anyway." She rocks back onto her heels, rubs at her eyes. "You really think this is going to work?" she asks, quietly.

"I don't know," Claire admits. "Not for sure. But right now this and a landline are the only ways we have of getting in contact with them."

Colleen nods. She inhales, exhales. She looks up at the ceiling and calls, "Danny? Luke? Are you guys there?"

For a minute, there's no response. Claire's just about to turn away when the lamps hum to life.

Colleen makes a small, terrible noise, somewhere between a delighted gasp and a choked sob. She covers her mouth, her eyes watering with tears, and whips around to the letters. "Danny, can you hear us?" she says. "Blink twice if you can!"

The lights—all of them—blink twice.

Colleen all but collapses, and Claire catches her before she can. "Is Luke there?" Claire says to the wall of lights. "Y for Yes, N for No."

The bulb over the letter Y flashes a bright red.

"Oh, thank god," Claire murmurs. "Where are you guys?"

The bulbs flash, one after the other, in green and red and blue and yellow: *H-E-R-E*.

"You're on another plane?" says Colleen.

Y. Confirmation of their suspicions right there.

"How did you get there?" says Claire. "More importantly, how do *we* get there?"

A-L-L-E-Y, is the answer to Claire's first question. The next is more disheartening: *C-A-N-T-D-O-N-T*.

"We need to get you guys out of there," says Colleen, eyes going hard and flinty. "Did you find a way out?"

N.

Claire licks at her chapped lips. "Can you?" she says.

Y. But there's a follow-up: *B-U-S-Y*.

"Why?" says Colleen, stepping forward. "What's keeping you guys from coming home?"

M-O-N-S-T-E-R-S.

“Like the one in Jessica’s wall,” says Claire, the horror sinking in. How long have Luke and Danny been running from monsters like that *thing*? How long can they keep it up? They’re both fighters, they’d fight for as long as they could, but even people with abilities like Luke and Danny have their limits. “Can you hold out for a little while longer? We’re coming to get you guys out.”

The lights flash with urgency: *D-O-N-T*.

Colleen’s jaw tightens, her eyes flashing somehow brighter than the lights. “Danny,” she says, “I am going to get you out of there, monster or no monster. Do you understand? We are not going to leave you. *Either* of you.” She breathes out, and says, “*Do you understand?*”

Y.

Then: *G-O-I-N-G-N-O-W*.

Then: *I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U*.

Colleen makes that noise again, halfway between delight and grief, as the lights flash more and more and more until finally, they fade completely out.

When she finally collapses, Claire catches her, and the two of them lower themselves to the ground.

“We’re going to get them back,” Claire promises her. “We will. *We will.*”

And she knows just where to start.

--

not hallucinations.

When Jonathan’s done recounting his encounter with Trainer, Steve lets his head fall back against the wall with a gentle *thunk*, a brief flash of pain momentarily wiping out the constant stream of thoughts getting poured into his head.

Momentarily, anyway.

“*Others?*” says Nancy, her brow furrowing. “That bitch.” No, wait, that’s not Nancy speaking, that’s Nancy *thinking*. Jesus, he needs to learn to tell the difference when they aren’t concentrating on images to drive into his head.

“Yeah, others,” says Jonathan, running a hand through his hair. It’s easier to tell when he’s thinking and when he’s speaking, at least for the moment, he’s dwelling on the things that Trainer said. “I’m not sure if all of them survived—she seemed impressed Steve did.”

“Hooray, I’m special,” Steve grumbles, pressing his fingers to his temples.

Jonathan scoots slightly closer. So does Nancy, her legs bumping against his. Steve, instinctively, curls into Jonathan’s warmth, as Nancy’s hand slips into his, her calloused fingers stroking over his.

Even then, he can still hear Jonathan’s thoughts, replaying the conversation. *What good are Harrington’s results if I don’t have anything else to compare them to?*

He remembers—

“Oh, god,” he says. “I thought—I thought they were just, what, TVs someone left on—”

“What are you talking about?” says Nancy, puzzled.

“There *were* others,” says Steve. “They weren’t in the same place I was, and I’d gotten drugged up to the gills so I wasn’t even sure they were real, but I—I heard them, I *know it*, and—oh, god.” He runs his hand through his hair once more, staggers to his feet. “One of them—One of them was just a kid, crying for his dad.”

Jonathan looks up at him. He doesn’t say anything, but Steve hears him anyway: *We need to get this kid out.*

It’s Nancy who says, “Do you know who he was?”

“No,” says Steve. “No, like I said, I was drugged to the gills. I thought

I was just—hallucinating or something.” But when he thinks of the kid, he can’t help but think of the kids he’d known—Dustin and Mike and Max and Lucas and Will and El. God, especially El. “Nance, we need to—I don’t know, we’ve got to find this kid and take him with us when we leave.”

Nancy stands up, takes his hands. “I know,” she says, “I know, but—we don’t know the first thing about this kid. Not even his name. How are we going to find him in the limited time we have to get out?”

Goddammit, she’s right. She’s *right*, but: “We can’t just *leave* him—”

“We won’t,” says Nancy. “We *won’t*. We’re going to meet up with El and Mike and the rest, we’re coming back here to get this kid and the others out, then we burn this whole place down.”

“We shut the gate once before,” Jonathan pipes up, before he stands to take Steve’s hand as well, and it takes a minute for Steve to realize it’s just his thoughts, not his voice. *We can do it again if we have to. But first we need to get out of here, we’re in no shape to rescue anyone.*

“We come back here,” says Steve, “and we get the kid out first. And anyone else who’s been used as some—some *guinea pig* for psychic powers.” Like Steve himself. God, how did El manage this? How did she not collapse under the weight of—oh, right, El’s not a mind reader.

But still. *Still*.

“We will,” Nancy promises. “We will.”

“But first we get out of here,” says Jonathan.

20. you were born to burn

Summary for the Chapter:

“Not bringing anyone else along?” says Jessica.

“No, this is—it’s our thing to deal with,” says Nelson. “Ours and yours, technically, it’s Luke and Danny. But the stuff going on’s ours. I can’t say much more than that.”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Halestorm's "Freak Like Me".

before the storm.

Here's the problem with having people that you care about, really and truly: when they go missing, you can't not care about them. You can put most missing people out of your mind, unless you're being paid to find them, but not when the missing person is someone you've loved, someone you've gone drinking with, someone who once took the brunt of a hundred bullets for you.

So Jessica's not going to let this go. Not even when Foggy Nelson calls her to say as much.

“Your little friends tell you to tell me that?” says Jessica, unimpressed as she walks down the street. Malcolm's been fussing over his weird little pet lately, and Jessica had woken up to him and Trish bent over books on the care and keeping of amphibians and reptiles and arguing over which advice applied to their situation. When she'd left, they were *still* going. “Can you tell them to grow some balls and talk to me themselves? I'm in the phonebook. I'm not exactly hiding.”

“I don't like being the go-between for you guys either,” huffs Nelson. *“I've still got to find Steve. And Karen's apparently following up on a bunch of shit on me, so.”*

“Tell her to talk to Hogarth,” says Jessica. “Hell, if Page wants, I've

got a few chips to cash in with Hogarth anyway. Been solving a few cases for her on the side.”

“I thought you guys weren’t exactly getting along great,” says Nelson.

“We aren’t,” says Jessica. Hogarth is trying to be a better person, that’s something Jessica can at least respect, but—still. Still. *Still.* “You realize I’m not gonna back off just ‘cause you’re telling me to, right?”

“Thanks for the warning, and honestly, I’m sort of counting on it,” says Nelson, surprisingly cheery for someone whose warnings fell on deaf ears. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say nothing dents that sunny disposition of his. *“If you drop in on us doing some freaky shit, tell them that I put up more of a fight than this, all right? Oh, and—what’s the address you found that weird crime scene alley at again?”*

Jessica tells him. He snorts out a laugh. *“Five white people and one black guy in a dirty Harlem alleyway,”* he says. *“You’d see us coming from a mile away.”*

“Not bringing anyone else along?” says Jessica.

“No, this is—it’s our thing to deal with,” says Nelson. *“Ours and yours, technically, it’s Luke and Danny. But the stuff going on’s ours. I can’t say much more than that.”*

“Yeah, I know,” says Jessica, stopping at a street light. “Fifty million NDAs.” And considering Nelson’s current legal troubles, she can’t really press him on what the hell kind of shit he and his old gang from some backwater Indiana town are up to. God, she hopes it’s not some leftover cult bullshit.

She’d better make sure it isn’t.

“Be careful, Jones,” says Nelson. There’s real concern in his voice. Almost involuntarily, she wonders how many times he must’ve told Matt to be careful.

Matt. Jesus Christ. If only they’d all gotten out. If only she’d hauled him up onto her shoulder and carried him out, never mind the kicking. *If only, if only, if only.*

“You too, Nelson,” she says, and hangs up.

Then she turns right instead of left, and heads for the subway. Thirty-four minutes, from the station on 50th to Harlem. Plenty of time to get there.

--

The first thing Foggy does is walk Brett back to the station. Not up to the station itself, he's sure Brett's going to get a lot of stink-eyes and unwanted attention just being seen next to him nearby, but near enough.

“I can talk to Manolis, if you want,” says Brett. “See what's up. Can't promise anything, though.”

“That's fine,” says Foggy, “it's fine, Brett—”

“It's not fine,” says Brett. “You're a damn pain in my ass, Foggy, but you're not half as greedy as most of the lawyers I have to deal with.”

“Is that a *compliment*,” says Foggy. “You haven't complimented me since sixth grade!” He nudges Karen, who's scrolling through the Notes app on her phone, and says excitedly, “Did you write that down, Karen?”

“I did not,” says Karen.

“But it's a historic occasion!” Foggy exclaims. “Brett complimented me!”

“Wouldn't have done it if I knew you'd make such a big deal out of it,” grumbles Brett.

“So?” says Karen, smacking his shoulder with the back of her hand. “I actually have other things to do, you know, besides record what you think are historic occasions.”

“*What I think*,” says Foggy, offended.

They leave Brett near the precinct, after that, and Foggy walks Karen to the *Bulletin* offices, asks her about her stories and her life and the

things he missed out on, for six months. It's as good a distraction tactic as arguing with Lucas had been.

It's only when they're at the entrance that she stops, and looks at him. He hasn't shaven in a while, he's pretty sure he looks like a slightly more presentable hobo, and somehow that thought makes him self-conscious enough to duck his head a little, scuff his shoe against the pavement.

"I'll see you around?" he offers.

Karen smiles, bright as the sun. Almost like old times. Foggy resists the urge to glance anywhere away from her, looking for Matt. "Yeah," she says, and pulls him into a hug.

He's getting hugged a lot more these past few days than the last six months. It's easier now to shut his eyes and hug her back.

"Keep safe," she says.

Oh, god. "I will," he lies.

He walks back to his apartment, and holds back a scream when he picks up a formal written letter informing him that, by the way, he's being subpoenaed for tax fraud about four days from now. Of fucking course. He's unemployed and single, Steve is missing, Matt is *dead*, he's going to be homeless soon, his license is suspended, and now he's got to show up in court in four fucking days.

"*Fuck*," he says, pressing his fingers to his temples to try and stave off the oncoming headache. Jesus Christ.

Okay. First, find Steve. Then deal with all this other shit. Hopefully they can find Steve in four days.

But first things first for today: Luke and Danny. He grabs his bag, stuffs his baseball bat inside, then picks up his old Mets cap and puts it on. At the very least, if anyone asks what he's doing, he can say he's off to coach a Little League team.

He catches the subway uptown, because it's cheaper on him than catching a cab like he would've once, and it doesn't inconvenience

Max or the others. He tries his hardest not to imagine everyone's staring at him, because this is New York, he's sharing a subway car with a lady casually cosplaying Leia Organa and a guy with a giant pink mohawk and a kilt. No one is going to look at the unshaven guy with a baseball bat poking out of his bag.

He doesn't meet anyone's gaze, anyway.

--

oncoming storm.

The alleyway's already got some people poking around by the time Max pulls up to the curb. The Party, minus Dustin, spills out of the car, with Jane, Will and Mike doing some last-minute prep and weapons swapping. Max takes Lucas, and the two of them step into the alleyway only to find—

"Lucas? Max?" says Claire.

"*Claire?*" says Max, at the same time Lucas does. It's definitely a shock, because she's never seen Claire with—*spiked gauntlets?* "Wing?"

Colleen Wing scowls a little at them, her fingers curled around the hilt of a katana, currently sheathed. "What are you guys doing here?" she asks, suspicious.

"Looking for Cage and Rand," says Lucas. "What are you and Wing doing here?"

"Why would looking for Luke and Danny," says Claire, gesturing towards Max's barbed-wire bat and Lucas' handgun, "need those?"

"I could ask you the same question," says Max, in as even a tone as she can manage beyond the shock and confusion and growing horror. What is Claire doing here? "Why the gauntlets and the katana?"

"Hey, we've got maybe a little bit of a problem," says Will, coming up behind them with an ordinary baseball bat, wiping his hand off on his shirt for some reason. He stops when he sees the two women, blinks, and says, "Lucas, Max, do you know these people?"

“Apparently not as well as we thought,” says Max, looking Claire up and down. There’s something different about the way she holds herself now, like she’s ready to fight if she has to. Max—Max really hopes it doesn’t come down to that.

Wing, beside her, hasn’t moved, but her fingers are tightening on the hilt of her sword. Her eyes flick from Lucas, to Max, to Will.

But it’s Claire who says, “You guys maybe want to explain what’s going on here?”

Lucas lets out a breath. “We can’t explain it,” he says. “But you two need to get *out* of here before anything bad happens.”

Claire looks at Colleen, who shakes her head and says, calmly, “I think we can take care of ourselves.”

“Some spikes and a fancy sword might do some damage,” says Max, stepping forward first, “but you don’t know what you might be going up against. Believe me, if you guys stay here, you’re going to make our jobs so much harder.”

“Jobs?” says Claire. “Have you guys—You’ve *done* this before?”

“Guys,” says Will, “seriously, what’s going on here? Who *are* these people?”

“You shouldn’t be here,” says Jane, coming to stand beside Max. She’s not carrying much, just brass knuckles on one hand, but Max has known her for long enough that she knows Jane is a weapon all by herself. “You need to get *out*.”

“Sort of blocking our path there, ma’am,” says Claire, and Jane steps politely aside. “But we’re not leaving. Not until we get Luke and Danny back.”

“Why are there civilians here?” says Mike, coming up behind them with a shotgun. “Guys, why do they have a sword and spiked gauntlets? *Guys*.”

“*Civilians*,” says Wing, sounding almost offended. “Claire’s right, neither of us are leaving until we can get Luke and Danny back from

that monster-infested plane—”

“You know about the Upside Down?” Max interrupts.

“You *encountered* the Upside Down?” says Lucas, alarmed.

“The *what*,” says Wing, at the same time Claire steps forward and says, anger simmering under her tone, “Lucas, Max, what the *hell* have you guys been keeping from us?”

“Seriously,” says Mike, sounding impatient, “I’d really appreciate some introductions here, because *who are these people*?”

“Maybe,” says Max, watching Claire like a hawk, “I should be asking you that. Where does a nurse get a pair of spiked gauntlets?”

“How and why does a stuntwoman,” says Claire, “somehow get a real metal bat with barbed wire wrapped around it?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Max spies Wing starting to slide her sword out of its sheath. Jane narrows her eyes, as if starting to gather her will, and Lucas goes tense like he’s just waiting for the tension to explode, before—

“Uh, guys?” Dustin’s voice calls, and everyone whips around to see him. Even Wing resheathes her sword.

“Foggy?” says Claire, and Max whirls on her heel to stare at her in shock. She hadn’t—She hadn’t realized Claire knew *Dustin*, of all people. She hadn’t realized he hadn’t told her his real name.

“Dustin?” says Lucas, at just about the same time.

“What the fuck, *Claire*?” says Dustin, blinking at them all in shock. He knows Claire, how does he know Claire, what is going on in this city? “You have claws? When did you get claws?”

“Oh, that’s your name, Claire?” says Mike, a little testily. “Great, it’s so nice knowing you, now can you please get the *fuck* out of here?”

“You know these people, Nelson?” says Wing.

"Dustin," says Jane, and oh, shit, Max knows that voice, it's her *friends don't lie* voice, "you know these people?"

"Foggy," says Claire, in calm tones, her eyes narrowing, "what. The *fuck*. Is going on?"

"Did you tell your friends about the Upside Down?" says Max, evenly.

"Um," says Dustin, and Max resists the urge to roll her eyes. He'd been better with his words than that, when they were growing up. "Claire, you should really get out of here, because I've got a feeling things are about to get very bad here. Like, bad of the variety that has very sharp teeth—"

"We know about the monster in the wall," says Claire.

"Again, when did you guys run into the Upside Down?!" says Lucas, starting to lose his temper.

"Uh, guys," says Will.

"The *what*," says Dustin, "when was this, *how* did this happen—"

"Nelson, Foggy, Dustin, whoever you are," Colleen's saying, heat rising in her voice, "I swear, if these people put Danny in danger for the sake of whatever secret they're keeping—"

"We are trying to keep you *out* of danger," Mike snaps, "and, Dustin, what the *hell*—"

"Guys," says Will, and Max turns first to see him staring in horror at the wall, just beside the dumpster.

The wall that's—oh, god.

"Guys," says Max, urgently, stepping closer to Will, holding her bat out to bar his way.

"—never said anything!" Dustin's saying. "Literally, I had no *fucking* clue, all right, I knew Luke and Danny were missing but no one, not even Jessica, told me about the fucking *Demogorgon*—"

“You can’t just *say that*—” Mike’s saying, more and more agitated.

“You two have to get out of here right now or I swear I will *make you* —” Jane’s saying.

“Danny and Luke have been missing for days and you had all the information we needed all along!” Colleen’s raging. “What the hell did you keep all of that in for? Why didn’t you say anything?! What kind of *selfish*—”

“I would’ve said if I’d known they were in the Upside Down sooner!” Dustin snaps.

“We didn’t know either, not until this morning,” says Lucas. “Also, Dustin, what in the *fuck*—”

“*Guys!*” Max shrieks. “You’re drawing it in!”

Everyone stops arguing and turns, to see the same thing Max is staring at—the silhouette pressing against the wall, the high-pitched shriek of a Demogorgon echoing as if in the distance, the shadows lengthening and growing, as of about to suck them all into hell.

“Uh,” says Dustin. “Has anyone cut themselves shaving, recently?”

“Yeah, about that,” says Will, and Max sees him raising his hand up, sees the fresh cut on his palm where it must’ve gotten caught on some barbed wire or a nail, “I might have. Accidentally cut myself on one of the weapons we stashed in the Mustang’s trunk.”

“Oh,” says Lucas. “Oh, was that what you were going to talk to us about?”

“Brace yourselves,” says Jane, urgently.

Colleen Wing steps forward, unsheathes her sword. The blade gleams in the rapidly fading sunlight, and Max finds herself wondering if Wing would ever be willing to show her what kind of moves she could use with a sword. Then she finds herself wondering if Wing’s going to point that sword at *her*.

But instead the woman steps in front of her and Will. “Run,” she tells

Max, which, what the fuck, woman, she's been facing these things since the tender age of thirteen. She knows best how to deal with petal-mouthed monsters.

But what emerges from the wall isn't just a petal-mouthed monster. It's brought friends—demodogs in the latter stages of their development, dog-sized spiders that make awful non-spiderlike hissing noises, and *much bigger* spiders, with a hundred eyes all over their bodies.

The Demogorgon, the first to break through the wall and the leader of the charge, throws itself right at the first person it sees: *Wing*.

21. they pick and they pull trying to get their fingers in

Summary for the Chapter:

“Hi, Jessica!” shouts Foggy Nelson, bashing in a dog-sized eye-spider’s head with a baseball bat.

“What the fuck,” shouts Jessica right back.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Nine Inch Nails' "We're In This Together".

cw for spiders and some eye squick. don't worry, the eye squick doesn't happen to any main characters.

hurricane.

Jessica buys herself a coffee first, when she gets to Harlem. For one thing, she should really be asleep right now. Most of the time she's asleep when the afternoon rolls around, but since Luke and Danny disappeared, she's been all too keyed up to get much sleep. She pours some whiskey in, and takes it slow, sipping as she walks down the street.

Harlem isn't exactly her usual stomping grounds—it's Luke's, and while some of her cases have taken her uptown, she doesn't really head up of her own volition *often*. Most of the time Luke heads *down* instead, sometimes with Danny in tow and sometimes not, sometimes for drinks and sometimes just to talk.

It takes her a while, then, to find the alley again. And mostly, that's just because of the screaming and general violence, as well as the Mustang parked outside conveniently blocking any passers-by from seeing what's going on.

Jessica starts walking faster. She whips around—

“Jesus fucking Christ!” someone shrieks. Jessica ducks a—a corpse? Of a *giant spider*.

Except the corpse is not totally dead, because then it flips over and Jessica finds herself staring at the thing and its *oh Jesus fuck God shit there are eyes all over its gross body*. She screams a little, because spiders are one thing but this *thing's eyes* are all swiveling towards her, and she splashes her piping hot coffee in the pair of eyes most focused on her.

It screams and rears back.

She punches *through* its abdomen, and her fist makes an awful squelching noise as she draws it back out, covered in goo and bits of eye. The thing lets out a shrill shriek, but there's no time, because Jessica hears another horrible noise. She grabs one of the spider's legs (*ew ew ew ew EW*) and spins around, sending both it and the hairless eyeless petal-mouthed dog into a wall.

"Hi, Jessica!" shouts Foggy Nelson, bashing in a dog-sized eye-spider's head with a baseball bat.

"*What the fuck,*" shouts Jessica right back, before she has to duck because Colleen's katana flashes out and skewers one of those weird-ass dogs. Is it a dog? Dogs are *much nicer*.

"Did you *call Jessica Jones down here?!'*" yells Max Sinclair. She and her husband are pressed up against each other's backs, Max swinging a barbed-wire baseball bat around like a pro as her husband's gun barks *one two three*, three bullets for one monster.

"He asked me not to come," says Jessica. "He was *very strong* about it."

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Nelson giving her a thumbs-up as he bashes in the head of a hairless, eyeless dog that's trying to menace Claire despite her angry swipes at it. She flips him off.

Another corpse goes flying, hits the side of the car. Jessica turns to see a woman, about Nelson's age, with dark curls and blood coming out of her nostril, whipping around and doing weird hand gestures. Monsters go flying, getting skewered on swords and spikes and bashed in by baseball bats and brass knuckles.

Jessica's not stupid or blind, she knows when someone's moving shit around with their mind. What surprises her is that Foggy Nelson, he of the completely normal if somewhat shitty lifestyle, is currently teaming up with some scrawny-ass beanpole to try and fend off a—a petal-mouthed monster, with its face opening up to reveal rows and rows and rows of teeth, like that shitty clown from that shitty clown movie.

"We need to close the gate!" Curly yells. He whips around with that shotgun of his and fires, taking down an eye-covered spider creeping towards Wing.

Jessica looks. Beside the dumpster, there's more monsters pouring out. It's like the wormhole over Stark Tower, the sky tearing open and the monsters pouring out. For a moment Jessica's stock-still.

Then Colleen yells, "Duck!" and Jessica ducks. Wing's katana flashes out and slices into a spider-like thing, and it screams again.

"A little busy here, Mike!" shouts Psychic Lady. With a gesture of her hand, the petal-mouthed thing trying to eat Nelson and Scrawny is thrown across the alley and pinned back against the wall.

Next to Jessica, conveniently. It screams, opening its mouth once more.

She puts her fist through its open mouth. There's an awful squelching noise, and she's pretty sure she's cut herself on the sharp teeth, but it thrashes around a little before it dies.

"Can you shut that thing?" she says to Psychic Lady, waving her hand at the—the portal-wound, whatever. There's a giant spider trying to come through.

Psychic Lady nods. "I've done it before," she says, swaying a little on her feet. "But I need—"

"Someone to keep you from getting jumped," says Jessica. She glances around, sees Claire and Wing double-teaming a giant spider, Lucas picking off snarling not-dogs, Max and Scrawny and Nelson finishing off smaller (but still unnaturally-sized) spiders and hairless

eyeless dogs.

Curly—*Mike* races up to Psychic Lady's side. "El," he says, worriedly, "you okay?"

Psychic Lady, whose name is apparently *El*, nods, wiping at her nose with her sleeve. "I'm okay," she assures him.

Jessica marches forward just as the giant spider comes through and kicks it hard enough to dent the dumpster. A moment later, she's elbow-deep in its underside, *again*.

"You people are going to pay for this jacket," she informs them. Or, well, informs Mike, because El's thrust her hand out and is screaming, blood coming out of her nose as the wound starts to stitch together once more. A blind dog comes charging up towards them, and Mike whips around with his shotgun, blows it away at point-blank range. Close to, anyway.

Another petal-mouthed dog. This one Jessica kicks hard enough to snap bones. The portal, behind her, disappears under brickwork and grime.

The last monster, one of the bigger eye-spider things, falls to baseball bats and Claire's spiked gauntlets.

For a moment all's quiet, save for everyone breathing hard, save for weapons clattering to the cement.

Then El sways a little, and collapses. Mike catches her first, holds her up while whispering something in her ear.

Jessica shakes her hand out, and says, in even tones, "Will someone explain to me just what the *fuck* did I help out in?"

Scrawny turns to look at Nelson first. Then Claire, with a simmering anger in her eyes, then Colleen, whose sword is covered in goo and black blood. Then Max, and Lucas, and Mike. El's too unconscious to do much looking, but Jessica gets the sense she'd be glaring at Nelson too.

"Oh, *come on*," says Nelson.

"You're the one who invited her up here," says Max, acidly, which is just rude of her. It's also accurate, because Jessica'd gotten the implicit sense of him wanting her to help out in his phone call. He just—hadn't given her all the details. All the apparently monstrous details. Oh, Jesus.

Nelson looks between them, before he breathes out, shoulders slumping a little as he massages his temples. "Yeah, I can explain," he says, "but uh. Can we do it somewhere with less corpses?"

"Okay, second question," says Jessica, "how are we going to dispose of these?"

There's a long, awkward silence.

"How far are we from the Hudson?" says Lucas.

"Not that far," says Claire. "It's only about, what, a few minutes' walk from here?"

"With or without carrying demodogs?" says Scrawny.

"I am *not*," says Jessica, jabbing a thumb at the corpses surrounding them, "carrying any of those things all the way to the Hudson." She pauses, and then says, "And seriously, *demodogs*?"

"It's a mash-up of demogorgon and dog," says Nelson.

"From *Dungeons & Dragons*?" says Claire.

"It's a very, very long story," says Nelson.

--

bold statement.

The first time Marci meets Karen Page, without Foggy hanging around, Karen's in the lobby of Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz's offices, pacing near the comfortable armchairs provided for visitors to wait.

"Miss Page!" Marci calls, her heels clicking on the linoleum floor. Karen whips around, her eyes narrowing just a fraction as she looks

Marci up and down, her arms crossing. Something about the way she watches Marci is understandably wary, since they hadn't exactly gotten off on a great start. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, I did," says Karen. "Can we—Can we talk? Outside the building?"

"Why not here?" says Marci. "The acoustics are perfectly good in my office."

"Because your office doesn't have croissants in it," says Karen.

"You make a good point," Marci concedes. She hooks her arm through Karen's and says, "My 2:00 appointment canceled on me anyway, so I have an unexpected block of time to fill up. I'll go."

"Great," says Karen.

It doesn't take them too long to get to the bakery Karen's talking about, a newly-opened shop bearing the truly uninspired name of *Sweet Inspirations*. Marci can't help but raise a perfectly-plucked brow at Karen, who tugs her inside and greets the clerk by name.

No wonder Foggy liked her. She's got his tendency for making friends.

Marci's heart twists a little, at the thought of Foggy.

She'd known Foggy was up to something, but this is—she can't quite believe it, herself. Maybe it's denial, but she doesn't think that Foggy's the sort of person to bribe a cop with anything that even looks like money. Cigars, sure. Donuts are fair game, she's seen him carry a whole box of Krispy Kreme to a precinct in the Bronx for tips. Hell, she can see him trading home repairs for tip-offs.

Money, however? That's not his style. Too damn moral, for that.

Karen takes her to a booth in the back, once they've got their croissants and milkshakes.

The first thing she says is, "I think Foggy was framed."

Marci sits up straight. “What?” she says.

“Someone is setting him up,” says Karen, taking hold of the front of her jacket and pulling her down. “I don’t know who or why, but someone is trying to ruin his life.”

“Bold statement to make,” says Marci, her tone carefully neutral. “Are you sure you can back it up?”

“Yes, I can,” says Karen. “I know him. You do too—you know something’s fishy about this.”

Marci licks her lips. “That’s not admissible evidence in a courtroom,” she says. “Can you back it up?”

“That’s what I’m working on,” says Karen. “But I can’t build this case without seeing what the other side’s evidence is. And to do that—”

“You need an in,” Marci completes. “You need me.”

Karen nods. “I can’t make you do this, not if you want to,” she says. “Foggy wanted to keep you out of the loop, because he didn’t want to drag you into the shitstorm. You can keep out of it, if you want. I won’t blame you.” From her tone, it sounds like she even expects it, and Marci’s sure Karen’s probably got some kind of back-up plan on deck in case she refuses.

Of course. Of *course* Foggy wanted to keep her out of the loop. She’d be more flattered, if it didn’t also mean he’d been trying to keep her ignorant. As things stand, though, she’s half-tempted to leave him alone in that shitstorm. It would serve him right, not going to her for help.

But at the same time—

Framed. *Framed*. Who’d frame Foggy Nelson? The guy’s a teddy bear. A—very stupid teddy bear, if he thinks Marci’s going to back off just because he wants her to. And if Karen fucking Page thinks she’s not going to help because of self-preservation, by god, she’s going to prove her wrong.

“Let me guess,” says Marci, “you want me to steal the files?”

“More like send me pictures of the files,” says Karen, “and delete them ASAP after I get them. I especially need Manolis’ testimony, if you’ve got that—if I can poke holes in his story, shed some doubt on the events—”

“We might be able to clear Foggy’s name,” Marci completes. “I like how you think, Miss Page.”

“So you’re in?” says Karen.

“First,” says Marci, “you’re footing the bill for this little date. Second, tell Foggy to *fucking talk to me*, like the adult he’s supposed to be.” She takes a few sips of her milkshake.

“But yes,” she says, “I’m in.”

--

they grow up so fast.

“So I’m thinking,” says Trish, carefully shifting the grocery bag in her arms so as not to spill the reptile toys, “we should get a bigger terrarium. Nougat’s getting big pretty fast.”

“Maybe a little too fast,” says Malcolm. They’re halfway through Trish’s shopping list for their pet—whatever Nougat is, and Malcolm’s a little bit overwhelmed by all the stuff on the list. He’s pretty sure Jessica would have an aneurysm or something, complain they’re converting her office into a terrarium already. “Have you ever known a species that’s grown that fast? Besides insects.”

Trish licks her lips, and shakes her head. She’s leaning against the car, scrolling through her contacts. She’s running out of people who can reliably tell them just what the hell Nougat is. “Not really, no,” she admits. “I know mayflies, but those are insects. Nougat is—he’s not even amphibious, and he’s not a reptile either.”

Which should cement the new species thing, honestly, but neither of them are experts, so. “How long do you think we can keep him in Jessica’s apartment, the rate he’s growing?” he says. “Maybe we’ll have to find him a better home.”

Trish breathes tiredly out. "I wish I could take him," she says, wistfully.

"Wish I could, too," says Malcolm, with a sigh. Out of the corner of his eye, he spies a bald man in a black shirt, hurrying down the street.

Trish leans on the roof of the car. "Isn't that guy Bendis?" she says.

"Yep," says Malcolm.

"Where do you think he's going?" says Trish.

"I've got no idea," says Malcolm. "Come on, you said we had another store to hit up?"

22. tell what you have to tell

Summary for the Chapter:

Then Jessica, crammed in between Lucas and Claire, pulls her flask out of her jacket, unscrews the cap, and downs the whole thing in one go. "This is what those NDAs were about, isn't it," she says.

It's not a question. Jessica's a PI. She's good at observation, and she must've seen him fighting, swinging a bat around and down on the monsters' weaknesses. Like someone who's faced them before.

"Yeah," says Foggy.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Depeche Mode's "Policy of Truth".

best (?) of both worlds.

The ride back to Foggy's apartment is perhaps the most awkward car ride Foggy's ever had. And that's including the one after the party he and Matt made out at.

For one thing, at least he and Matt were talking, even if they were just fumbling around with their words and trying to reassure each other absolutely nothing would happen to their friendship because of that dare. This is more crowded, not to mention more tense—Max is gripping the wheel tight enough for her knuckles to turn white, for example, and Will keeps fiddling with his sleeve, as if his hands are anxious for something to hold.

For another, everyone keeps looking at him like he's the one with all the answers.

Which is just the problem here, isn't it? He's the one neck-deep in both worlds, he should have them—but he doesn't. All he's got are questions upon questions, like: when did Claire pick up some spiked gauntlets? Why are there demogorgons in New York? What the *fuck*

is going on here?

For a long while, no one says anything. They're too busy stewing in their anger, in some cases, or trying to understand what's going on, in others.

Then Jessica, crammed in between Lucas and Claire, pulls her flask out of her jacket, unscrews the cap, and downs the whole thing in one go. "This is what those NDAs were about, isn't it," she says.

It's not a question. Jessica's a PI. She's good at observation, and she must've seen him fighting, swinging a bat around and down on the monsters' weaknesses. Like someone who's faced them before.

"Yeah," says Foggy.

"NDAs?" says Claire.

"It's a long story," says Mike. His voice is a little muffled, because cramming nine people into a Mustang is hard and eventually Will had elected to clamber onto him and Foggy, being the lightest of the group. "But it involved shady lab experiments by the government."

"And other dimensions," Will adds.

"And monsters from other dimensions," says Lucas.

"Oh, Jesus," says Jessica. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were all on crack or something."

Foggy lets out a breath. "Believe me," he says, "I really wish that were the case."

The silence falls over them once more, almost suffocating Foggy with how oppressive it feels. The only thing that keeps it from being really, truly silent is Colleen absently playing with the lock, locked, open, locked, open, an incessant *click-click-click* rhythm.

"Whoever's fucking with the doors," Max starts, "*stop*."

Colleen stops.

Jane, in the passenger seat, stirs a little. “Where’re we,” she mumbles.

Will leans forward. “We’re heading to Dustin’s place,” he says.

“We’re almost there, actually,” says Foggy, leaning forward as well to direct Max. “Just take a right here. Second building on the left.”

They spill out, more or less, once Max parks the car in someone else’s parking space. Foggy helps Jane out of her seat, and he and Mike hold her up between them as they climb up four flights of stairs to Foggy’s apartment.

“I thought your powers were more—” Foggy starts, and falters.

“They are,” says Jane, more coherent now as Foggy gently lifts her arm off him and starts to fumble around for his keys. “But you try closing a portal to the Upside Down after fighting demogorgons, demodogs, and shelob-lings.”

“Okay, point,” Foggy concedes.

“Plus she did have to find Rand and Cage earlier,” Mike adds, as Foggy pushes the door open. He half-carries Jane inside, lays her gently down on the couch, says something too quiet for Foggy to hear that gets Jane smiling up at him.

Lucas pokes his head in, looks around. “I gotta admit,” he says, “this is *not* the kind of apartment I expected you to have.”

A year ago, two years ago, it might’ve been. There would’ve been pictures all over the place, of Hawkins and New York alike, memories frozen and framed and displayed with pride.

But it’s been a long, long time, and the pictures have all been quietly stashed away.

Save for the sign, hidden behind his law books. If only he’d saved the napkin, too.

He breathes out as everyone files in, then shuts the door, locks it and puts all the chains on. He shuts the curtains too. He considers, briefly,

going whole hog and recruiting everyone into sweeping over his apartment for bugs, before he dismisses the idea.

He's not Hopper, for one thing. He isn't *that* paranoid.

He flicks the lights on.

"Okay, get comfy," he says, "this is going to take a while."

--

a new kind of weird.

Claire's used to weird, is the thing.

She lives in New York. Iron Man flies over her head sometimes. Spider-Man swings past her regularly. Last week she's pretty sure the Scarlet Witch bought her a coffee after a trying day, but the woman had dyed her hair and wasn't wearing a stitch of red so she's not completely sure.

Plus, there's the Incident.

And then there's the world that she was dragged into, from the moment she fished Matt out of her dumpster.

So it's not as if she's a stranger to weird. She likes to think she keeps an open mind.

Then Foggy shuts the door and shuts the curtains, and starts to talk: about a boy disappearing into another world, about a girl in the woods where that boy disappeared, about the monsters that came after them—human and nonhuman alike.

The others flesh out the story, interjecting when Foggy gets a detail wrong, carrying on when he hands off an event he doesn't know about. Will talks about the other world, the Upside Down, the effects it caused him and will cause anyone else who survives it. Lucas talks about the vans, the government agents coming down on them.

("Bad men," Jane interjects.

“Yep,” says Lucas, easily, “bad men.”)

Jane talks about her past, the things done to her and the things she can do now, while she’s wiping at the blood crusted on her lip with one of Foggy’s dish towels. Claire’s gut churns, at the idea that anyone would raise a child in such a manner, shape them into a weapon from birth.

She looks at Colleen, sees her hands clenching into fists. She nudges her, takes her hand, and feels Colleen relax a little, her fists unclenching, leaving behind crescent-shaped indents in her palms.

Mike talks about staying with Will in a hospital. Max tells them about her own introduction, how Lucas pulled her in and the Party welcomed her after some time. And Foggy—

Foggy tells them the truth.

It’s the first time in a long time, Claire realizes, that the truth sounds completely unbelievable even to her. She’d dismiss it out of hand, if she hadn’t seen those demodogs for herself. If she hadn’t cleaned their blood off her spiked gauntlets. If she hadn’t seen Jane, snarling with a hand outstretched, and the portal to the Upside Down, herself.

Then the story’s over, and Foggy says, “Does anyone have any questions?”

“That slug you adopted,” says Jessica, distantly. “Did it like nougat?”

“Um, yeah, how’d you know?” says Foggy. “All I said was I fed it some candy.”

And suddenly it clicks.

“Oh, god,” Claire breathes. She pushes herself up to her feet, head still spinning with all of this new information, the new danger all too clear to her.

Nougat. Fucking *Nougat* is an extradimensional flesh-eating *monster*.

“Oh, *shit*,” says Jessica, scrambling to her feet. “Trish’s *pet*—”

“How much time did you say it took them to grow, again?” Colleen asks, also getting to her feet.

“Like, four days, five?” says Foggy, his forehead wrinkling up. “Guys? What’s going on?”

“Who’s Trish?” says Max. “The—You know the radio host from *Trish Talk*? Dustin, what in the hell—”

“He doesn’t know her very well,” Jessica interrupts, “but I do. She’s my family—and someone sent her one of those baby demo-whatevers —”

“Demogorgons,” says Lucas.

“Is *that* what you’re worried about?” huffs Foggy. Then his eyes grow wide and he whips around, and says, “Someone sent Trish a *juvenile demogorgon*?!”

“That sounds like an incredibly creepy fan, now that we’ve seen what it grows into,” says Colleen.

“I’m going to find them,” says Jessica, yanking her scarf off the coat rack, “and if either Trish or Malcolm get hurt by this baby monster they’ve been keeping as a pet in any way, I’m going to be fucking *pissed*.”

“Why would anyone send Trish a baby demodog?” says Claire.

“Why would anyone send *anyone* a baby demogorgon as a pet?” says Mike.

“The world’s shittiest method of assassination?” says Max. “Scientific curiosity? Shits and giggles? Who the fuck even *knows*.”

“What’s Patsy Walker ever done to merit assassination?” says Will.

“Maybe don’t call her that,” says Jessica.

Jane says, “I’m coming with. I know how best to take care of it.”

“No, absolutely not,” starts Foggy.

“You’re staying here,” says Claire, stepping forward. “Nurse’s orders. Don’t think I didn’t see you needing support to get up here.”

Jane bristles, in that way Claire’s come to recognize as the usual unwillingness to listen to anything that could possibly be in their way.

“Lucas,” she says, “I’m going with Jessica. Can you keep an eye on your friend for me?”

Lucas says, dryly, “You say that like you think I’m not going to sit on her to keep her from going after Patsy Walker’s pet demodog.”

“Lucas!” yelps Jane.

“I’ll help,” Max offers. “She likes me best. She hasn’t thrown me into a wall.”

“Yeah, me too,” says Will.

“Oh my god, Max—*Mike!*”

Mike opens his mouth. Claire pins him with a look.

He says, “I think I’ll do as the nurse says and make sure you stay here to recharge. Dustin?”

“I’m going,” says Foggy, picking up his goo-covered baseball bat and twirling it in his hand. “I don’t need recharging, and I’ve raised a demodog before.”

Claire readjusts the straps on her gauntlets, as Colleen slings her sword over her back again and Foggy slides his baseball bat into a bag, jams a Mets cap on his head. “You mentioned that the thing you fought, that first year, could tear open holes leading to the Upside Down,” she says, silently noting the lighter Foggy stuffs into his pocket. “Could Nougat do that? Right now?”

“No,” says Foggy, turning to look at her. “But we’ll get them back, Claire. We will. I swear. I *swear*.”

Colleen opens the door for them. Jessica marches out first, swearing

the whole way, and Colleen looks back at them.

“Remember when all we had to worry about was the Hand?” she says.

“Don’t remind me,” Foggy groans.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” says Claire, with a sigh, “but I really miss the ninjas right now. At least they were originally *from* this dimension.”

“Wait,” says Will, just before the door closes shut, “*ninjas?*”

23. stand up, catch fire

Summary for the Chapter:

“Nelson’s faced these things before,” says Jessica, “and also, incidentally, they’re the same species as the thing that tried to break through the wall. Oh, and they’re from another fucking dimension.”

Malcolm stares at her, trying to see if she’s high, or drunk, or some mix of both. But she’s not high, and if she’s drunk, it’s her usual level.

“You’re shitting me,” he says.

Notes for the Chapter:

title from AWOLNation's "Thiskidsnotalright".

home invasion.

The first thing Malcolm realizes when he and Trish push open the door to Alias Investigations is that it's *not locked*. In itself, that's already concerning enough, and Malcolm finds himself shifting closer to Trish, ready to push her out of trouble if need be, as he nudges the door open.

The second is that no human being can bleed that much and live.

The third is:

“Where’s Nougat?” says Trish, staring in horror at the general destruction and gore. Jessica’s desk has a significant dent in it, and there’s—quite a lot of blood, where something must’ve dragged a full-sized human being away.

Nougat’s terrarium is broken, shards of glass and bits of splintered wood surrounding its remains.

And nearby, the sound of something tearing meat off of a body.

Malcolm steps in first, following the sound. He picks up a bit of wood, just to make himself feel better about going in without any defenses. Trish, behind him, fished her phone out of her pocket.

The blood trail, still fresh, leads to the kitchen. Malcolm doesn't even want to know who it must've belonged to, but morbid curiosity drives him into the kitchen.

A creature with no eyes, about the size of a small dog, is—is *ripping* chunks of flesh out of poor, dead Bendis' chest. It throws its head back as it swallows, then pauses. It turns slowly around, as if to look at them.

"*Nougat?*" says Trish, horrified.

Oh, Jesus Christ.

The creature's face opens up then, lets loose an unearthly shriek and *nothing should have that many teeth*—

And then it flings itself at them.

Malcolm moves fast, tackling Trish to the ground. Her phone skitters into a pool of blood.

The creature whips around, faster than it should. Its face opens up once more, like a flower blooming, if the flower had rows and rows and *rows* of teeth. It shrieks, like that thing that tried to come through Jessica's wall, and crouches as if to pounce again—

"*Get the fuck away from them!*" Jessica's foot kicks out, and the creature hits the window. It shakes off the disorientation and snarls at her.

Claire's in front of Malcolm and Trish in a flash, taking off the spiked gauntlets. "You guys okay?" she asks.

"We're bruised," says Malcolm, "but we're okay."

"Is that thing *Nougat?*" says Trish. Then she cranes her neck and says, "Mr. *Nelson?*"

The creature snarls at Jessica and jumps at her. She hits the floor hard, but before it can try to dig into her chest, she throws it off with enough strength to smash what's left of Nougat's terrarium.

Nelson, brandishing a bat, cracks it against the creature's body as it gets up. It hits the window once more, shattering it, and, Jesus Christ, it *gets up*.

Colleen's sword flashes out, leaves a long gash up its leg. It howls, and flings itself out the window and into the shadowed alley below.

"Oh, *shit*," curses Jessica.

"We're going down there!" Colleen declares, and she and Nelson sprint out of the office the same way they came. Jessica, however, rushes to Malcolm and Trish's side, kneels down as Claire fusses over Malcolm's hand—apparently there's some splinters in it that need getting out.

"You're alive," she says, relief palpable in her tone and her face.

"I guess some of your toughness rubbed off," Malcolm says. "Um. I've got some bad news for you."

Trish says, "Bendis is in your kitchen."

"Yeah, I noticed the dead body," says Jessica, looking up and eyeing the body with some concern. "Jesus Christ. Can't I go six months without someone fucking *dying* in my apartment?"

"How are we going to spin this to the police?" says Claire.

"Home invasion gone horribly wrong," says Trish, rallying pretty damn well. "Also, what just happened and why is Foggy Nelson wielding a baseball bat against—Jesus Christ, that was *Nougat*."

"It's a really, really long story," says Claire, painstakingly taking out splinters.

"Nelson's faced these things before," says Jessica, "and also, incidentally, they're the same species as the thing that tried to break through the wall. Oh, and they're from another fucking dimension."

Malcolm stares at her, trying to see if she's high, or drunk, or some mix of both. But she's not high, and if she's drunk, it's her usual level.

"You're shitting me," he says.

"I really, really wish I was," says Jessica.

"Ninjas are one thing," Trish puts in, "but that's—that sounds insane."

"There is a dead body in my kitchen, I'm not in the *mood* for shitting anyone," says Jessica, with a tetchy voice, and that changes things for Malcolm, because Jessica's abrasive but she never sounds so *panicked* unless something bad is going on—it's real, all of it. Horrifyingly so. "Trish, did you keep the thing you found Nougat in?"

"Um, yeah," says Trish.

"Hold still," says Claire, pulling out the last splinter. "Okay, got it. Where's your disinfectant?"

"Bedroom," says Jessica, "bedside cabinet."

Claire leaves, and Malcolm breathes slowly out. "What's going on?" he asks.

"Luke and Danny didn't get kidnapped to anywhere in this New York," says Jessica. "They're trapped in another dimension, and it has a fuckload of monsters. Oh, and Nelson and his buddies have been fighting them since they were like, thirteen or something."

"Foggy *Nelson*," says Trish, stunned. Malcolm can sympathize. Nelson had seemed like a fairly normal guy in the precinct, working through his cases while they waited around for updates on the Midland Circle mess. This is—definitely not normal.

It's then that Nelson stumbles back inside, with Colleen just behind him, her sword sheathed.

"Bad news," says Colleen, "that thing got away."

"Slightly less bad news," says Nelson, "it's still daytime, so it's not

going to go very far on the surface.”

Colleen smacks his shoulders and says, “You’re leaving out the part where it’s sneaking through the sewers now.”

“Oh, right,” says Nelson. “That.”

Jessica says, “*Jesus Christ.*”

--

recon.

Matt stalks Troy from his home address in the shittier parts of Hell’s Kitchen, beaten out of Turk and other scumbags, as the day starts to cool, a sure sign that it’s dusk. Almost time for Matt to really get to work.

Here’s the thing about Troy: he’s a bully. More than that, he’s the kind of bully who’s been one since he was a kid, and never really grew out of it. Just—got bigger, got access to more dangerous means of hurting people.

Here’s another thing: he’s got a grudge against Will Byers, and Foggy, and the rest of the people from Hawkins who’ve come here, looking for Jonathan Byers and his spouses. Jane Wheeler is a particular target of his ire, for some reason.

Matt waits for him to pass down the alley. He doesn’t have to wait very long, he can smell Troy’s sweat and Axe body spray from here, as well as smoke from the cigarette he’s lighting.

Matt drops.

Troy barely manages to get the knife out before it clatters to the floor. He’s not much of a challenge for Matt, even if Matt’s not wearing his armor at the moment, and eventually Matt punches him out cold.

He ties his hands behind him, first. Then he hauls him up to a sitting position, and pats his cheek, hard.

“Whuh,” Troy mumbles.

“You must be Troy,” says Matt.

“You’re the *Devil*,” says Troy, terror in his voice.

“And you tried to kidnap a defenseless young man, as well as participate in his brother’s kidnapping,” says Matt. “I just need to know: *why*.”

“I’m not telling you!” Troy snarls at him.

Matt cocks his head. “Well,” he says, “I gave you an easy way out.”

Ten minutes later, he clambers up to the rooftops once more. The police sirens won’t be coming until long after he’s gone, but Troy’s not going anywhere for a while, with his hands tied behind his back. Matt’s not sure if Troy’s going to survive the night in the precinct, he’ll have to check on him after this.

First, though—he needs to check out Carolyn Trainer’s current illicit storage space, an old warehouse in the Meatpacking District, the one Troy had said she kept some *things* that he’d been too scared to go near, or describe in a lot of detail. The same one he claims has the kind of weapons the Vulture used to sell, the kind Fisk might be interested in.

His wound twinges, the same one Will had given up on restitching and simply bandaged up, while asking him to please, just *please* let himself heal. He’d sounded—a little like Foggy, actually, asking him to take a break, *please*, would it kill him to take a night off? Not even to drink, but just to heal after a particularly bad night.

So. Tonight he’s only on recon mode. He just needs to stay near the warehouse, maybe inside it if possible, and listen for anything relevant to Jonathan Byers or Foggy Nelson.

Should be easy.

He’s been doing this way too long to believe that.

24. so hard to live without your softest touch

Summary for the Chapter:

It's just a sign. Right?

It's just a sign with Dustin's missing friend's name on it.

Notes for the Chapter:

title from flor's "back again".

a little lost.

The thing about Jane's powers is that they take a while to recharge, but they recharge quicker when she gets some food in her, so Will recruits Max and Lucas into rifling through Dustin's cabinets for something that could be turned into actual food.

There isn't much.

"Why is there so much *junk food*?" Lucas grumbles. As a nurse, he's probably the most offended about Dustin's enduring dietary choices out of all of them, but Will's kind of judging a little too. If only because Dustin apparently believes in the virtues of latte-flavored potato chips, which is just horrifying.

Jeez, Dustin.

"It's not that much," Max argues.

"You think a burger that's taller than Mike's old Darth Vader figure is a good lunch," Lucas shoots back. "A burger with *ten* strips of bacon, by the way."

"It is a good lunch," says Max.

"It's a triple heart bypass surgery just waiting to happen, is what it is," Lucas huffs, but he and Max bump each other's shoulders and exchange smiles as he passes by to yank open Dustin's fridge. "How much beer does one person even need?"

Will, with a hastily-assembled sandwich in one hand, leans on Lucas and looks over his shoulder. There's a lot of beer in Dustin's fridge, definitely—a worrying amount, in fact. And Will's got the feeling they've been there a while, even before Dustin's life started to collapse in on itself. He just wonders how long, exactly.

“Not that much beer, that's for sure,” says Max, looking over Lucas's other shoulder. “And not that shitty. I know a guy currently in Germany who could brew better than this swill.”

“I thought we were never going to talk about Oktoberfest '05 ever again,” huffs Lucas.

“I didn't say anything about Oktoberfest '05,” says Max, innocently, “you did.”

Will sighs, his eyes catching on some leftover pad thai shoved into a Tupperware container. It's not much, but he takes it out anyway. The fridge door shuts, and he shoves the container into Dustin's microwave.

There's nothing left to do, then, but wait, so he drifts out of the kitchen. Lucas and Max do, too, but they move to the curtains to talk about Hawkins, the next job Max has lined up that's likely to take her to Cairo for a month to, and Will's quoting here, “be killed by Katniss Everdeen in Michael Bay's latest self-congratulatory bullshit movie,” and what they're going to do for that month, should she go.

Mike and Jane are doing that—thing, where they stare soulfully into each other's eyes while Mike plays with Jane's hair. It's honestly adorable, but it has the side effect of making Will want to flee the room, because he feels like an intruder watching them at it.

His phone vibrates briefly, in his pocket. He pulls it out, and can't stop himself from smiling stupidly down at the cat video Bruno's just sent him. He sends back an emoji, because—well, that's just what you do, right, when you've been dating a guy for two months? Then again, how would Will know, he's not very experienced in the dating business.

He stuffs his phone back into his pocket, still smiling goofily. Then he

sees the sign.

Nelson & Murdock, Attorneys at Law. It's hidden behind a stack of law books, but poorly at that, and Will steps closer, close enough to reach out and take it down. It's not very new, it's even a little bit tarnished, the edges worn away, but—

All the pictures are gone. And there must've been pictures, this is Dustin. Somehow this is the one thing that's left, of a part of his friend's past that Will only knows bits and pieces of.

The door opens. Dustin's the first to walk through, saying, "Okay, so Nougat the man-eating pet escaped through the sewers, but on the bright side—shit, I can't think of a bright side."

"And you're asking me for one?" says Jessica, annoyed, stepping through the door. She shakes her hand out. "Someone died in my apartment. *Again*. Can't go six months in this shithole without having to call someone about the dead body in the office, goddammit." She makes a beeline for his kitchen, saying, "You'd better have improved on the beer!"

"The beer doesn't need improvement," Lucas says from the window. "Also, you *really* need to make some room for actual food in your pantry, not just—alcohol and junk food."

"I have some pad thai!" says Dustin.

"I'm nuking your pad thai right now," says Will, just as the microwave helpfully *dings*. "And it's going to El."

"Swell," mutters Dustin, but then his eyes catch on the sign in Will's hands. He goes all too quiet and still, and for a second Will half-thinks he's going to see whatever Dustin's been keeping back finally spill out of him.

Instead Dustin shakes his head, bites his lip, and walks too fast to the kitchen. Will shoves the sign back into its place, has to dodge Claire, Colleen Wing, Patsy Walker and a young man with tired eyes on his way back to the kitchen. Dustin's taking out the container with shaking hands, eyes shadowed, breathing harsh.

“Hey,” says Will, taking his hand. “Hey, it’s too hot. You’ll burn yourself.”

Dustin seems to almost snap back to himself, blinking. “Oh,” he says. “I—Mittens, I need—”

“You need to sit down,” says Will, “I’ll take the pad thai out to El.” He yanks the mittens off the hook they’re hanging off of, and carefully takes the pad thai out of the microwave. Dustin follows him like a ghost, as if Will handling the sign somehow knocked him off-course. He’s not sure why, is the thing, it’s just a sign. Right?

It’s just a sign with Dustin’s missing friend’s name on it. Like a tribute to his memory.

He gives Jane the pad thai, and she stops soulfully staring into Mike’s eyes for long enough to thank him and peck him on the cheek. Will cuts a glance over to Dustin, who’s watching Mike and Jane with fond exasperation, and something—sadder, somehow.

“Hey, Dustin,” he says, “can I borrow you for a moment? You know your kitchen better than I do.”

Dustin blinks, caught off-guard. “Sure,” he says, and he and Will step back into the kitchen as the Party and Dustin’s friends congregate for an urgent meeting. “I’ve still got some other leftovers, besides the pad thai, just—gimme a moment.”

“Are you okay?” says Will, quiet.

Dustin huffs out a breath. “Of course I am,” he says. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You know you’re kind of bad at this, right?” says Will. “I saw the beer. And the sign. I’m not blind, Dustin.”

Dustin’s breath hisses out between his teeth. His eyes flick away from Will as he pulls open a cabinet, roots through it for some bread, some peanut butter. “I’m fine,” he says. “I’m—*fine*.”

“Can you look me in the eyes and say that?” says Will, quietly.

Dustin looks up at him. "I'm," he starts, but then he stops. His eyes water, his face crumples, and he looks down, rubbing furiously at his eyes. He grips onto his countertop and *crumbles*, shoulders shuddering as he breaks down, and Will's taken a step closer and tugged him into his arms before he really thinks about it, instinct driving him to hold his friend through the storm.

And there's been a lot of storms, lately.

Jonathan's missing, yes. But Will knows he can find him, and Nancy and Steve with him, believes they're going to be okay even if they're hurt somehow. Dustin doesn't even have that much, not to mention everything else that's been happening lately.

And the Upside Down, too.

Eventually Dustin's breathing steadies, and he breaks away, wiping furiously at his eyes. He looks Will up and down and says, quiet, "I—god, this has just been the worst reunion."

"It's terrible, yeah," says Will. "But it isn't that bad."

Dustin stares at him. "We nearly got eaten by a demogorgon in a Harlem alleyway," he says.

"Okay, it's that bad," says Will. "But, listen, Dustin, we solved this once before. We can do it again." He nods to Jessica Jones and her friends, giving their own story. "And you got help this time, too."

"Hopefully they'll make it through this mess," Dustin mutters, running a hand through his hair. "You okay?"

Will looks at Dustin, then breathes tiredly out. "As okay as anyone can be," he says. "I'm not *fine*, not like you keep telling people you are, but I've got help and leads on where Jonathan might be."

"You got an idea where?" says Dustin.

"Not where," says Will, "but an—anonymous source, let's say, pointed me in the right direction."

"I can head there," Dustin offers, which is nice of him, but—he's got

enough on his plate already, with all his losses, so Will shakes his head and pats his shoulder.

“I can just ask Jessica or El to come with me,” he says.

“Yeah, yeah, I can see your point,” says Dustin.

Will nods, then starts digging through Dustin’s cabinets for some plates. “And,” he says, “about Murdock—”

Dustin’s quiet again, before he says, “Can we—Matt’s not something I want to talk about, right now. I can’t do anything about that, but I can do something about Steve, Nancy and Jonathan.”

“Okay,” says Will, deciding to back away from that subject for now. After all, he wasn’t up for talking about the Upside Down or the Shadow Monster to anyone for a long time. “We’ll table it for after?”

Dustin’s fingers drum against his countertop, and he chews on his lower lip, absently. “After,” he says. “But first we’ve got to rescue a few people.”

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don't want to be long.

Security on the warehouse is not easy to dodge. If Matt had time, he’d have learned their patterns over the course of a few more weeks, but that’s not a luxury he has at the moment, so instead he finds himself frantically dodging security guards as he sneaks inside.

One time he has to knock someone out before they can raise the alarm, and drag their prone and zip-tied form into a container. Then, slowly, deliberately, he works his way down to the ground floor.

He cocks his head, and grits his teeth when he hears Turk’s cheerful voice. Oh, come the fuck *on*.

“—top of the line stuff,” Turk’s bragging.

“They’d better be,” says Hargrove, distinctly unimpressed. Disdainful, too. “The last shipment didn’t work for shit.”

“If you’d just tell me what you’re using them for—”

“None of your business, that’s what. Now scram.”

Turk storms off, and Matt catches him muttering something insulting about Hargrove’s bathroom habits. He kinda has to agree with the man, as much as agreeing with Turk Barrett, of all people, makes Matt feel as if he’s been irrevocably and indelibly stained.

He follows behind, passing by containers that smell like—decay, somehow, but a sickly-sweet sort of rot instead of the foul smell he’s used to off of the occasional corpse. Like vegetables or flowers, he thinks, rotting from the inside out.

He passes by one container.

Something inside it *howls*, a shrill noise that sends Matt stumbling back and gritting his teeth, leaves a ringing in his ears that doesn’t quite leave even after the howl is gone. Shit.

He strains to hear, over the ringing, the sound of Hargrove’s voice. It’s tough, and he has to stumble away from the container, hand flailing out for an alcove, a container, something to keep him from sight. His world on fire gives him a silhouette just big enough for a man to hide behind, and he ducks behind it.

“—fucking hell,” Hargrove’s saying to himself, as Matt strains to hear him, trying to push away the ringing. It is *not* working as well as he’d like it to. “Bitch better have a reason—”

More ringing.

“—king scientists.” All right, so at least there’s confirmation Hargrove’s also working for Trainer, along with Fisk.

Something else rings: Hargrove’s phone. The man curses and picks up.

“Yes, sir? Harrington’s charge? I know—”

More of that damned ringing. Matt grits his teeth, and when the ringing passes Hargrove’s already finishing up, saying, “I’ll send

someone to his place tomorrow, since Troy's out of the picture."

Harrington's charge—Foggy. *Foggy*. They're planning something to do with him, and with Will Byers as well. Exactly *what* it is he doesn't know, but he can't allow them to hurt Foggy. More than they already have, anyway.

The ringing blurs much of what Hargrove says next, but he catches his last sentence: "—let me into the basement, see the *look* on King Steve's face when I tell him."

He sneaks out of the warehouse, a plan spinning together in his head. They're planning on targeting Foggy at home tomorrow?

Matt's just going to need to get him out of there, somehow.

25. it gets worse here everyday

Summary for the Chapter:

Then Colleen says, "Danny's the Iron Fist."

"The what," says Lucas.

"That sounds vaguely ominous," Max comments. "What, is he like a secret wrestler or something?"

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Guns N Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle".

still hurting.

By general consensus, everyone but Colleen and Claire elects to stay in Foggy's apartment for the night.

"My home is a crime scene," says Jessica. *"Again."*

"My place is near hers, and I don't really sleep great near crime scenes," says Malcolm, with a little shrug. Foggy can hardly blame him, he's not great at sleeping near crime scenes either.

"You think I'm leaving Jessica here after all that I saw?" says Trish, when Foggy asks her.

"I don't need someone to keep an eye on me," Jessica interjects from the couch, a little tetchy. "Anyway, I've got Malcolm."

"Who said I was going to keep an eye on you?" says Trish, serenely. "You punched a hole through your own wall to fight a monster, I figure wherever you are may just be the safest place to be."

It's maybe the first time Foggy's ever seen Jessica actually almost smile at anyone, even if it's for just the briefest of moments before her usual scowl settles back into place. "All right, Nelson," she says, "where are your blankets?"

“Why are you so *picky*,” Foggy marvels, but he grabs a blanket and tosses it at her and Malcolm anyway. “One of you order in, I’m too broke to order for—*eleven people*, holy shit.” Jesus, why’d he let these assholes stay in his apartment for the night? He doesn’t even have that much money left for himself, he certainly doesn’t have enough money for eleven people.

Claire snorts out a laugh and shakes her head. “Nine people,” she says, which is a small relief. “I’m going back to my apartment. Maybe Luke and Danny might talk to me again.”

“You’ve been talking to them?” says Foggy.

“Through—this is gonna sound weird,” starts Claire, just before Will says, “You’ve been talking to them through the lights?”

Colleen nods, and says, “Right, you were—you talked to your mother through the lights too.” She leans against the wall, crossing her arms across her chest. “How long did you say it took before that *thing* found you?”

“A week, tops,” says Will, laying out a sleeping bag from Max’s Mustang’s trunk on the floor beside the couch. “I was twelve at the time, though, and I didn’t have bulletproof skin like Cage, or—what does Rand have, anyway? All I know about him is that he’s really rich. Like, Tony Stark levels of rich.”

Foggy debates, for a second, telling them about the Iron Fist. Briefly he imagines telling his friends exactly the same story that Danny told him, and winces a little. From the outside, every single part of Danny’s story sounds like a bad kung-fu movie, and no doubt that would be the first thing any of them would say.

Then Colleen says, “Danny’s the Iron Fist.”

“The *what*,” says Lucas.

“That sounds vaguely ominous,” Max comments. “What, is he like a secret wrestler or something?”

“I wish he were,” Foggy grumbles.

“It’s a very long story,” says Colleen, “but the short version is, he’s very good at punching things, and at surviving what other people normally wouldn’t survive. Him and Luke both.” Then she sighs, and runs her hand through her hair. “The sooner we can get them back, though, the better. If the atmosphere’s toxic, I’m not sure how long either of them will last.”

Foggy tenses a little at the thought, meets Claire’s worried eyes. Luke’s skin might be invulnerable, but there’s other ways to bring a man down. He’d seen that six months ago, when they’d brought Luke, Jessica and Matt in, explaining that they’d all been knocked out somehow by some kind of sedative in their system.

The Upside Down’s a lot worse than that.

“I’d give them a few more days,” says Will.

“I don’t know about that,” says Jane, from the armchair she’s taken over. “They’ve been hiding a while, and when I tracked them down Danny looked—” She licks her lips, her eyes meeting Colleen’s from across the room. “He looked bad,” she says. “Very, very bad.”

Colleen closes the distance between herself and Jane. She kneels, like a suppliant. “Can you track them down again?” she asks, quietly. “Could you talk to them?”

“She needs to rest first,” Mike says, quietly. “She flung around those demodogs earlier, and before that she tracked them down once. She needs to recharge.”

“I can try,” says Jane, “but I can’t guarantee anything right now. Tomorrow, though—if you came by the apartment we’re staying in, I can help you. I can talk to them.”

And that hasn’t changed, has it, in the twenty years since Foggy left Hawkins: her desire to *help*. No matter what the cost might be—he remembers her looking back at them, at Mike, and smiling sadly, his last sight of his friend for almost a year. *Goodbye, Mike.*

Almost unwillingly, he looks at the sign.

Matt’s body had been warm against his, the last time they saw each

other. He'd let him go, hoping he'd come back, hoping maybe finally he'd hang the suit up for good and just—be a lawyer. Just be *Matt*, without the horns.

Should've known better, right? Should've tried harder to get him to come back, safe and sound. Should've said something, then maybe Matt would still be here. Would still be *alive*.

This might be worse, he thinks, than what Mike felt, the year Jane was gone. This might be worse than what they all felt, the week Will went missing. This might be worse than Luke and Danny going missing, than Steve, Jonathan and Nancy's disappearance. At least for all those other times there'd been a little hope that maybe, just *maybe* —

He doesn't have that with Matt. He knows, with this awful, terrible grief, that Matt is dead. Is never coming back. No *maybe* about it, no *what if*.

He'd never even said—

He huffs out a breath. "If you guys want," he says, "I can walk you back—"

"I can drive them back," Max interrupts.

"Yeah, I think I'll take the free ride," says Claire. "Been meaning to catch up with Max anyway, though—there's a lot to catch up with."

"I'll say," huffs Max. "Where did you even get those gauntlets?"

"It's a very long story," says Claire, and the three of them—Max, Claire and Colleen—step out of Foggy's apartment.

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make it stop—

Three meals so far, and Steve's gotten mostly nothing about floor layouts from the people dropping off their food through a little slot. Which, you know, isn't entirely helpful.

He does know that one guy is wrestling with the ethical dilemma of cheating on his wife with her sister, another needs money to sustain the lifestyle standards he's grown accustomed to, another's worrying about his student debt, and another, for some godforsaken reason, sometimes has weird foot-centered fantasies.

None of that's useful, though, and as much as he tries, this mind-reading thing he's gotten saddled with just—doesn't seem to *work* the way he wants it to, not in the brief window of time that any of them are there.

He's keeping watch tonight, watching Nancy and Jonathan sleeping on each other, when he hears footsteps outside. A moment later, he hears a man's voice—*god, let him be okay, let my boy be all right, I can't have done all of this for nothing—*

"Your boy?" says Steve, out loud, before he can stop himself.

The man's thoughts screech to a halt. Literally, Steve claps his ears over his hands.

"Who—Who's there?" the man calls.

"Right here," says Steve, "and for fuck's sake, stop *thinking* so loudly."

"What?" says the man. "You—Where are you? Who are you?"

"I'm behind the cell door," says Steve. "And my name's Steve. Now who are you?"

"Just—Just a guy, that's all," says the man, and all the while his thoughts keep straying to his kid, worrying about whatever procedure his boy is going through, about the costs they're incurring to cure him of this persistent *thing* that keeps popping up. "What are you doing in here?"

"Cooling my heels," says Steve, dryly. "Your kid—you stuck him in this place? With Trainer?"

"Yes," says the guy. "She—She promised, right, she said she knew how to fix him. Make him feel better." A flash of memory comes to mind, and Steve's watching a young boy, with dark and curly hair

not unlike Dustin's, crying for his father, in the midst of a storm. *Why can't I stop feeling, dad, make it stop please make it stop—*

"Yeah, she lied to you," says Steve, trying to untangle himself from the memory and the feelings it leaves behind, the terror and shame and fear festering in his stomach. It's not his. It's *not his*.

"What?"

"She lied to you," says Steve. "She told you she could fix your kid? I've got bad news for you—*she's not*. I know for a fact that she's been running experiments on people with psychic abilities, 'cause I'm one." He breathes out, tries to push away the memory of leather straps around his wrists. "I'll bet you anything she's using him, and recording all of it. That's what they do."

"You're lying," says the man, but there's an uncertainty in his voice. He's been uncertain since he got here, terrified out of his wits. Steve can fucking hear it in the man's thoughts, unspooling in Steve's own head.

"I'm a prisoner in a cell in some fucker's secret lair," says Steve. "What would I be lying about?"

"You could want to get out!" says the man.

"Yeah, okay, fine, I do want out," says Steve, "but what the hell would I be lying about, exactly? The part where someone shoved psychic powers that I barely even know how to control on me? The part where your kid's getting hurt?"

"I'm—I'm paying protection, I'm doing what they're *asking* of me, they wouldn't hurt my son! Not as long as I'm doing as they ask!" And there, that spark of doubt. *Could they?* "I—I didn't say anything, even when Daredevil b-broke my wrist!"

Steve had been popular once. In high school, that meant *pushing* on doubt like that. Carol had always been the best at it, had once said *real life sucks losers dry*, but even twenty years after, Steve still knows how to push someone to the edge of one emotion or another. It's a skill that, once learned, you never quite forget.

He says, “Sure about that? Or are you just trying to tell yourself that, make yourself feel better about throwing your son to the wolves?”

“I wouldn’t!” the man says, desperate.

“He cried for you,” says Steve. “I could *hear him*. He didn’t know why you left him there, he thought he’d done something bad.”

“He—He didn’t, I would never leave him, I’d do anything for him—”

“Sergeant Manolis!” comes the shout. Steve freezes in place, and Nancy and Jonathan come awake with a start.

Fisk. Jesus, *Fisk*. Being anywhere near Fisk is like being near a thunderstorm of rage, his thoughts battering the insides of Steve’s head with the force of a tornado. And, god, all of it, *all of it* is focused on Dustin and his friends, blind and dead Matt Murdock, pretty blonde Page.

It’s horrifying, the wrath that Fisk holds towards Dustin. They have to get out of here, before it escalates any further. Before he decides to *take* lives instead of ruining them.

“M-Mr. Fisk, sir,” stammers Sergeant Manolis.

“I have a task for you,” says Fisk. “I need it carried out with utmost haste. Can you do that?”

“What the hell kind of task does he need a sergeant for?” Nancy wonders out loud—or, no, that’s her thoughts. Steve shakes his head and concentrates on telling the difference—much harder, with someone like Fisk around, a roiling storm underneath a pristine white suit.

But he can hear, in Sergeant Manolis’ silence, his thoughts—about his son, about Daredevil, about Steve’s words. About the things Fisk could do to his boy, should he displease him.

None of them are pretty. All of them are sickening, and the worst part of it is, he’s got a front-row seat to Fisk’s brain.

He knows for a fact that Fisk would absolutely do all of them.

“Yes, sir,” says Manolis, with a terrified gulp.

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take your soul back.

Marci pokes her head into the office and says, cheerfully, “Walters!”

Jennifer Walters startles, badly, whips around as fast as lightning to blink owlishly at Marci. “Marci?” she says. “What—What are you doing here? I thought you went home!”

“I did,” says Marci, easily, “but then I remembered I was going to pick up a few files in Hogarth’s office.” As excuses go, it’s not the worst one Marci’s ever concocted. “I figured, well, better late than never, right? Is she in?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” says Walters. She’s tiny and jittery and nervous, the sort of person who could be devoured alive by the sharks in the legal system, a consummate people-pleaser. At least outside of the courtroom.

“Why do you want to head into Ms. Hogarth’s office so late, anyway?”

Goddammit. Sharp as a goddamn whip, this girl. Under other circumstances, Marci would be more impressed by the steel under her mousy exterior.

“I just don’t want to bother her,” says Marci, giving her a winning smile. “I’m sure she has better things to do with her time.” Like sleeping.

“You could schedule an appointment for tomorrow, though,” says Walters. “Since I’m right here and all. I could just enter it into her schedule.”

Ah, hell.

“I wouldn’t want to bother you, either,” says Marci. “You must be busy, if you’re staying late here. I can manage just fine even without an appointment.”

“But—” starts Walters.

“Do you really want to shift so many meetings just to accommodate me?” says Marci, leaning on the table to fix Walters with a *look*. The woman quails under it, eyes growing wide with fright behind her glasses. “What do you think Hogarth would think?”

Walters gulps, and nods. “Okay,” she says, meekly. “Okay.” She turns away, and Marci strides into Hogarth’s office, quietly shuts the blinds so Walters won’t see her rooting through the files on her desk, in her cabinet, looking for Foggy’s case.

She finds it, takes it out.

She flips it open and breathes out, seeing the pictures of Foggy, talking urgently with Daredevil. Testimony from Manolis, who’s never been arrested or charged with anything before, and from a few other witnesses. Incriminating, grainy security cam pictures of Foggy talking quietly to small-time criminals and cops, passing by *something* that looks a lot like money.

It looks incriminating. It *should* be incriminating. Hell, she shouldn’t even be doing this, risking her job, *again*.

But she thinks of Foggy, reaching out a hand, saying, *take your soul back*.

She fishes out her phone and starts taking pictures.

26. does it feel like you gave it all away?

Summary for the Chapter:

“He tried his best to kill us and your takeaway is that his mullet was bad?” says Mike, with a huff. Nelson snorts out a laugh, reaches over to flick his nose. “Hey!”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Amber Run's "Insomniac".

breakfast of champions.

The next day dawns bright and—

“Please tell me there’s something in here that isn’t either alcohol or leftovers,” says Trish, opening up Nelson’s fridge. She’s got that look in her eye that says she’s doing her damndest to ignore the slightly starry-eyed looks some of Foggy’s friends keep sending her way, because *it’s Patsy!*

Jessica shoots them all a look from the doorway of Nelson’s kitchen. Yes, even Jane, though Jane doesn’t quail under Jessica’s gaze the same way her husband and buddies do, just looks back at Jessica like she’s kind of surprised anyone would turn a glare on her.

Probably she is. Who’d pick a fight with a woman who throws goddamn monsters around with her mind, right?

“There’s pancake ingredients,” Nelson says, valiantly, from where he’s opening cupboards. “Milk and eggs.”

“There’s maybe enough for like three people,” says Lucas. “And that’s not nearly enough for *all* of us.” He waves a hand at the living room, and everyone in it.

“Oh, there are Eggos in here,” says Trish. “There are a *lot* of Eggos in here.”

“Can I see them?” Jane calls from the living room. Trish holds out

one box of frozen waffles, still rooting around in Nelson's fridge.

Jessica looks at Jane, sees the blood coming from her nose and the intent way she's looking at Trish. About a second later, the box *flies* out of Trish's hand, and Jessica has to duck before she can get brained by a box of shitty frozen waffles. Max sidesteps easily, like she's used to this craziness, which—come to think of it, she is.

Come to think of it, they're all used to one brand of craziness or another. Hell, last week Jessica tricked Danny into swinging by her place so he could warm up her cold pizza with his magic fingers.

God, last week feels like a lifetime ago. A lifetime with no alien dogs or government conspiracies or Nelson's weird-ass friends.

—Trish is staring at Jane like the world has just been yanked out from under her. Oh, right, Trish wasn't there for the monster-fighting extravaganza yesterday. Jessica gently pulls her away from the fridge, letting Lucas and Nelson take over and bicker over the alcohol.

"She just—" Trish starts, eyes wide.

"She's psychic," says Jessica. "And Nelson's more of an expert in weird shit than I thought he was."

"Yeah, I overheard all the talking last night before I got to sleep," says Trish, massaging her temples, "it's just—different, seeing it for myself." She looks at Jane, huffs out a breath. "Jesus, what's Nancy gotten herself into?"

"It's a long story," says Jessica, weary. "It does involve a government conspiracy, though."

Eventually they pull together a reasonable imitation of breakfast from what's in Nelson's kitchen, which is a miracle, considering easily a quarter of it is Eggos. Malcolm slathers his with what's left of the peanut butter in Nelson's cupboards, and Jessica steals half of Trish's sandwich.

Malcolm says, "Okay, explain to me again: we're going to track down Luke and Danny in this other plane—"

“Upside Down,” Mike helpfully supplies, absently smacking Foggy’s reaching hand. “It’s called the Upside Down.”

“Upside Down, okay,” says Malcolm. “Can you track Jonathan, Steve and Nancy that way? *Are* they in this other place?”

“They’re not in the Upside Down, but I can’t pinpoint their location,” says Jane, shaking her head. “Something’s blocking me whenever I try. I’m not sure what, though—I’m not even sure if it’s something or *someone*.” She sighs, runs her hand through her unruly curls.

“I do have a lead though,” Will volunteers, which, great. “From an anonymous source. They said Billy Hargrove lived on the corner of 9th and 43rd—”

The name ripples out like a shockwave through the little Hawkins crew. Mike’s jaw sets, Lucas’ nostrils flare, Max’s posture stiffens, Jane’s eyes narrow, and even Nelson curses a little.

Malcolm just sighs, deeply, and massages his temples. “Oh,” he says, distinctly unhappy, “Hargrove. I remember him. He used to be an old dealer of mine.”

“Of *course* Billy’s involved in drugs,” Nelson grumbles. “Like he wasn’t already a total dick.”

“I’ll go talk to him,” says Jessica. “Can’t be too hard.”

Max stares at her. For a second Jessica half-wonders if this is an ex of hers or something, but then her mouth slowly turns upwards into a smile. “My stepbrother’s got a bad reaction to spiked bats,” she says. “And as it just so happens, I’ve got one in my trunk.”

“A bad reaction?” says Trish.

“She drugged him and threatened him with a nailbat once,” says Lucas, pecking his wife on the cheek. “It was awesome.”

Jessica’s got to admit, it does sound pretty cool. She pries some more of the details out of them, and the more she puts together a picture of Billy Hargrove the more she’s reminded of Simpson, mostly, and of some of her more belligerent clients.

Malcolm fills in some details too. “He hasn’t actually changed much,” he says wryly. “Did he wear a mullet when you guys knew him?”

“Yes, and it was so *bad*,” says Nelson.

“He tried his best to kill us and your takeaway is that his mullet was bad?” says Mike, with a huff. Nelson snorts out a laugh, reaches over to flick his nose. “Hey!”

“It’s *one* of the things I took away,” says Nelson. “By the way, my friend Karen’s going to want Nancy’s notes on Trainer’s company. I can give you her number or just—pass it along, if you want.”

“Does she know about the Upside Down?” says Mike.

“Wait,” says Trish, cutting in before Nelson can answer, her eyes narrowing in anger, “wait—doesn’t Karen deserve to know about this? If she’s going to be investigating the same thing Nancy was looking into, you owe it to her to come clean with this.”

“They’re not going to,” says Jessica, because between these shits and Matthew Murdock, Nelson’s had far too much practice with keeping secrets from friends to truly be able to quit. She fixes Nelson with her most withering look, and says, “Fifty million NDAs, right?”

Lucky guy, that his phone goes off right at that moment. He excuses himself, says something about his friend Brett on the force, and Jessica watches him hurry out the door.

“At least,” says Will, into the silence that falls between them. “And you saw those things, Ms. Jones. They aren’t—They might not be *smart*, not the way we are, but we nearly got overwhelmed in that alleyway.”

“Not knowing what those things were,” Trish replies, “nearly got us killed. Karen *needs* to know—and before you ask, I guarantee you, she can keep a secret.”

“Which reminds me,” says Jessica. “Trish, can I swing by your apartment? Or wherever you stashed the basket your monster pet came in.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” says Trish. “I’ll put out feelers, see if anyone kept any records that could point us to who left Nougat on my doorstep.”

“Oh, you named him,” says Lucas. “Great, it’s Dustin and Dart all over again.”

“Who?” says Malcolm.

“He’s a *monster*,” says Mike. “Nougat, I mean.”

Malcolm’s lips press together into a thin line, anger flashing in his eyes. Too late, Jessica remembers: he’d loved that stupid slug. Enough to feed it and keep it safe.

God, poor bastard. She doesn’t know anyone else who’s as dubiously lucky as Malcolm is.

Nelson walks back in and says, “So, uh. I gotta get down to the precinct, something came up.”

“I’ll come with you,” says Lucas.

“You don’t *have* to—” starts Nelson.

“Brett’s working at the precinct, right?” says Lucas, cutting him off. “You think I’m gonna miss out on that? Your ongoing rivalry’s better entertainment than whatever shit the Kardashians are up to now.”

Nelson doesn’t respond with a witty rejoinder. Instead he lets out a long, slow breath, and says, “It’s not going to be very entertaining.”

--

man in a mask.

Lucas finds Brett sitting in an ambulance, with an ice pack held to a nasty bruise, and his other hand keeping pressure on his side with a white cloth, slowly turning into a blood-red color.

He also finds Troy in that same ambulance, unconscious and cuffed to a bed. There are abrasions around his neck like someone tried to strangle him, which—understandable, but also, what the hell?

Brett waves briefly at him. “Lucas,” he says, warmly. Less warmly, he adds, “And Foggy Nelson.”

“Hi, Brett,” says Dustin, managing to at least summon the ghost of a smile. “Um. What happened here?”

“Someone in a mask tried to strangle Troy,” says Brett, bluntly, and Lucas sees Dustin actually stop breathing for a second. “Black ski mask, before you ask, so no, he’s not the copycat you were going on about.”

Dustin relaxes. “Swell,” he says.

Lucas mentally files that away under Deeply Suspicious. Out loud he says, “You all right? Wait, did you *save* Troy?”

Brett winces. “God help me, I did,” he says. “See, there’s this little thing I’m supposed to be doing as a cop, it’s called *protecting and serving*.” He sighs. “No matter how much I’d personally not mind if someone strangled Troy.”

Honestly, Lucas can sympathize. Nurses aren’t supposed to discriminate, for one thing. “You’re a regular hero, Mahoney,” he says. “You get that bruise looked at yet?”

“The bruise,” says Brett, “and the gaping stab wound in my side.”

“On the bright side,” says Dustin, “there’s a chance you can now tell the weather with it.” He points at his own side and says, “The shrapnel wound I got from two years ago gets itchy before it rains!”

“A *shrapnel wound*,” says Lucas, alarmed, before he remembers—two years ago had been the explosions in Hell’s Kitchen.

“What about the gunshot wound?” says Brett, and that has less explanation. “Can that predict the weather too?”

“You got *shot*?!” Lucas yelps, whipping around. “When was this?!”

“Great, Brett, thanks,” Dustin mutters, which, hell no, he isn’t going to deflect that easy. Lucas grabs hold of his shoulders, turns him so he can only face Lucas. “It was the Punisher trial! Or afterwards. The

previous DA got shot dead and my shoulder accidentally got clipped, but I'm fine now!"

"It isn't fine!" Lucas says. "Why didn't you say anything about that?!"

Why haven't you said anything about your life in the past two years? he doesn't say, but the question hangs over their heads anyway, sits heavy on his tongue. He's missed out on what feels like a significant portion of Dustin's life, because at some point Dustin just—pushed them out. He still doesn't know why.

"I didn't want you guys to worry," Dustin says.

"We would've *helped*."

"Like I said," says Dustin, "I didn't want you guys to worry. You've all already got enough on your plates, anyway."

"A little notice would've been nice, though," says Lucas, irate now. "Instead of, oh, spilling the beans *two years later*."

"Speaking of an earlier time," says Brett, taking his ice pack off his cheek and hissing in pain as he shifts around to get more comfortable, "I think I've got an idea who the guy in the ski mask was."

Dustin whips around, eyes bright. Bright and hungry for something, but for what, Lucas isn't completely sure.

"Who?" Dustin demands.

"Guy was terrified for his kid," says Brett. "Couple that with how he knew the precinct's layout, where we were keeping the holding cells, and the fact he didn't disguise his voice?" He looks up at Dustin and Lucas, steel in his eyes. "I'll bet you anything it's Manolis."

27. oh these days get heavy

Summary for the Chapter:

Byers turns and says, with a huff, "I knew it. I knew it was you following us."

"What gave it away?" says Matt, amused.

"Your ass," says Byers, and Matt restrains a laugh as he climbs down to the ground.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Imagine Dragons' "Second Chances".

in the hood.

Byers hits the streets again, this time with two of his friends. Matt's not taking to the rooftops this time, not yet, but he tucks his mask into the pocket of his hoodie. Byers might know what Matt Murdock looks like, after all, and he can't—he can't let him know. As fond as he's starting to feel of Will Byers, he's under no illusions of the man's loyalty to Foggy, and he just—

He can't.

He tugs the hood up, down over his eyes, and waits until Byers and his friends pass him by. He follows behind them, keeping track of the sound of their footsteps and the sound of their voices, murmuring lowly to each other.

“—think Dustin's gonna be okay?”

“Honestly,” says Byers, “I don't really know. Everything's happening all at once, and I'm not sure if he's dealing all that well with—any of this.” His hand cuts through the air as he gestures vaguely around him, the sound audible only to Matt's senses.

“Yeah, Steve disappearing on top of losing his job, getting suspended, getting subpoenaed, and all that shit is pretty bad,” says the other

man. “And now all of *this*.” Another vague wave.

Matt steps to the side, avoiding an open manhole. A subpoena? Shit. Fisk is hell-bent on dismantling Foggy’s life—and Matt can’t help but wonder what *this* is, and if the mysterious Upside Down is tied into it in any way.

“It’s not just Steve,” says the woman, the one named El. “You guys saw the sign too.”

Sign?

Matt almost trips, his heart thundering in his ears.

He hadn’t—Matt had kept the sign first, after their firm disbanded. He couldn’t bring himself to throw it out, didn’t really want to, even if perhaps he should have. He hadn’t realized Foggy had found it. He hadn’t thought Foggy would keep it, either.

“You think Matt Murdock’s still alive?” the man says, a little further away than Matt would like. Matt speeds his pace up a little.

“The way Dustin acts, I don’t know,” says Byers.

“He acts the same way about Daredevil,” says El, and Matt narrowly manages not to trip over a crack in the pavement. Shit. Have they figured it out?

“Yeah, and?” says the man. “Maybe he was friends with Daredevil too.”

“Imagine that,” says Byers. “A lawyer being friends with a vigilante.”

Matt reins in a snort of laughter, as they come to a stop in front of an apartment building. Paint job’s fresh, it hasn’t quite faded into the background of the stink of New York.

“Stranger things have happened,” says the man, as Matt passes them by, listening all the while. “Oh, you should put that in your next graphic novel, once we’ve found Nancy, Jonathan and Steve.”

“Maybe I will,” says Byers, sounding a little distracted. Matt hears

Byers' heart beat slightly faster, but more than that—he hears a familiar heartbeat, coming down the street.

Claire.

Oh, fuck.

Matt tugs the hood lower, before Claire passes him by, speaking to Colleen Wing. He doesn't stop or speed up, not even when Claire's heel scrapes along the sidewalk as she turns, not even when Colleen asks her *what's wrong?*

He turns a corner.

"Just thought I saw something, that's all," says Claire, her voice fading as he gets further away.

He clambers up onto a rooftop, once he's sure no one else he knows is coming down the street. He pulls the mask on, the cloth slipping over his eyes, and zeroes in on Byers' heartbeat.

He slips the burner phone out of his pocket, sends Byers a text: *need to talk*.

Byers' phone buzzes briefly in his pocket, cutting into the whispered conversation between him, his friends, and Claire and Colleen. After a moment, he excuses himself from the meeting, says something about something unexpected cropping up, his heartbeat staying steady the whole time.

"We're not gonna leave you out here by yourself," says the man, a little agitated at the prospect.

"You're sure about this?" says El.

"I'll be fine," says Byers.

Matt hears them leaving, the door opening and shutting. He waits for Byers to turn into an alleyway, then jumps down on the fire escape, making sure to hit the metal grating with some force.

Byers turns and says, with a huff, "I knew it. I knew it was you

following us.”

“What gave it away?” says Matt, amused.

“Your ass,” says Byers, and Matt restrains a laugh as he climbs down to the ground. “Okay, no. But you’re a guy in a hoodie with the hood up and hiding your eyes. Do you not know what that looks like?”

All right, so he’ll have to quit doing that, then. He’d come far, far too close to Claire finding out, just now, and he can’t risk it again. “I wouldn’t know,” he says. “I might have an idea where your brother is.”

Byers says, his voice full of wary hope, “You—You do?”

“I did some eavesdropping,” says Matt. “He’s being held underground—I’d guess on one of Trainer’s properties. Has your brother given you any details on those?”

“Not a lot,” says Byers. “But he and Nancy have notes, I could take a look at them. We could narrow down the list.”

“Know any properties without needing to look at them?” Matt asks.

“Yeah, two,” says Byers. “There’s the building the company bought out from—Union Allied, I think? I don’t know when, but it was before Fisk went to prison, that’s for sure. It’s their main headquarters, a big-ass shiny building in Hell’s Kitchen with the company’s initials on display right above the entrance, you can’t miss it.”

Right. Byers thinks the Devil’s sighted. Matt hopes to god Trainer’s signage is easy enough to identify in his world on fire, because shit, a big-ass shiny building in New York? He can’t tell one from the other, and he doubts Hargrove would be kind enough to lead him there.

He doubts Jonathan Byers and his spouses would be there, either. It’d be hard to keep quiet about the less-than-legal components of Trainer’s business, otherwise, or about Fisk.

“The other one?”

"It's a lab," says Byers, and there's something bitter in his tone. "Yeah, they're calling it something else, a—I don't know, a *project development hub*, but I know a lab when I hear about it. That one's not too far away from where Midland Circle was—it's a white building, kind of new. I think they're still working on it, construction was delayed somewhat for some reason."

"Was it being worked on six months ago?" says Matt, pushing away the memory of Elektra in his arms, the building crashing down around them.

"I think so," says Byers.

"There was an earthquake six months ago," says Matt, "with Midland Circle as the epicenter."

"Oh," says Byers. "I'm—not really sure anyone can get in there. Jonathan used to complain they wouldn't even let him get pictures of the entrance without making him jump through hoops and sign a ton of NDAs."

"There's an advantage to being a vigilante," says Matt. "I don't have to worry about bureaucracy." He folds his arms across his chest and, taking a risk, says, "Your friend, Nelson."

"Nel—oh, you mean Dustin," says Byers, snapping his fingers. "He always said Henderson-Nelson was too cumbersome to fit in the name of a law firm. Why are you asking about him?"

Foggy had said the same thing, once, when they were in college. "Nelson and Murdock rolls off the tongue way better, you have to admit that," he'd said, the two of them tipsy with drink and simple delight, for having finished up some notes to submit two days from then.

"Yeah, it does," Matt had admitted. "*Henderson-Nelson and*—Jesus, I can't even say it."

"I know!" Foggy had laughed. "That's why I just say it's Nelson instead, 'cause that's so much easier to fit into a sign."

"Ooh, a *sign*," Matt had teased. "I hope we're getting embossed letters

on that sign.”

“In fucking gold, buddy,” Foggy’d promised. “Just for you.”

Matt had grinned then.

He’s not smiling now. “He’s going to be targeted today,” he says, and Byers’ heartbeat speeds up, a frantic drumbeat in his ears. “You need to keep him away from his apartment, Fisk is sending someone there after him.”

“*Shit*,” says Byers. “Okay, Lucas is with him right now, they’re at the precinct, last I checked Max went with Jessica and Malcolm, and Mike and Jane are with me, Claire and Colleen.”

“Back up,” Matt says. “The precinct?” Last he’d checked Manolis had run off, after Brett had managed to keep him from strangling Troy in his cell, but Matt hadn’t been able to track Manolis down—he’d gotten loaded into a car that had been parked nearby.

And Fisk had, apparently, taken some precautions, because Matt couldn’t hear anything that could distinguish it in any significant manner from any other car on the road. Not from the rooftops, in any case.

Hoffman all over again.

“Yeah, the precinct,” says Byers. “Something about Brett Mahoney? He didn’t say much about it, but he was worried.”

Shit, he’ll have to head over to the precinct to check on Brett. In the meantime: “Keep him away from home,” Matt says. “There’s a few places I need to hit first.”

Starting with a few of Fisk’s old lackeys still on the street.

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safe place.

Surprisingly enough, the only safe place in all of this bizarro New York is—

“Midland Circle,” says Luke, flatly.

“Apparently,” says Danny, half-slumped now. His voice is too thin and tired, his color too pale—even for a skinny guy like him.

They’ve set themselves up as near the remains of Midland Circle as either of them can stand, and it’s still far too close for Luke’s tastes. He still remembers that awful explosion of sound, the building collapsing in on itself, with Murdock still underneath.

He can only hope that it was quick.

“Could’ve done without coming back here again,” says Luke, glancing at the gaping hole where the building used to be. In their New York, it’s simply that—a gaping hole. In this one—he’s not sure why, but even the vines won’t go near it. The monsters avoid it like going near the hole would infect them with something. “It feels kinda wrong, even here.”

Danny gives a weak laugh, pulls his knees up to his chest. “Yeah, I know,” he says. “I’m almost expecting to see Jessica and—I’m almost expecting to see the others, honestly.”

“You and me both, Danny,” says Luke, with a cough. Damn it, it’s back. “You doing all right?”

“I could ask you that,” says Danny.

“Yeah, but between the two of us, I’m not the one ready to fall over any time soon.” Never mind the intermittent coughing fits, he can deal with those. “And I’m—”

Fine, he means to say, but the word snatches on a cough, and that first little cough becomes a full-blown fit.

Danny, who looks like he hasn’t seen the sunlight in a year, scoots over and steadies Luke before he can really collapse. The first time this had happened he’d done much the same thing, with a few nonsense words before Luke had smacked his shoulder and told him to relax, sweet Christmas.

This place is getting to them both. Luke can’t help but think—it’s

rotting them from the inside out. Especially Danny, who's been freaked out by the backwards flow of chi since they got sucked into this hellhole.

Eventually the coughing subsides, and Danny's nudging him up. "Yeah, you're fine," he's muttering.

"You're still the one who looks like he lives in a basement," Luke points out.

"Point," Danny concedes. His eyes slide away from Luke, to the hole in the ground where a building used to be. "There was a gate down there," he says, quietly, the first he's ever truly talked about what he saw there. "A gate only the Iron Fist could open."

Luke straightens up. "Really," he says.

"You saw," Danny reminds him. "I don't know if K'un-Lun ever knew about this plane. But I think—maybe if we can somehow find a way down there—"

"No," says Luke.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" says Danny.

"I do," says Luke, "but you light it up again, how much is it going to cost you this time?"

"It's not going to *cost me*—"

"You passed out the last time you used your fist here," Luke reminds him.

"But it chased off that *thing*," Danny replies, glaring blearily at him.

"And you nearly died because you were a hell of a lot slower than usual," says Luke. "I've had quite enough of people I care about dying on me. I'm not adding you on to that list."

Danny blinks at him, shock written across his face. "But if I can get us out of here—"

"No, I'm not risking it," says Luke. "I'm not going to gamble with your life on the line, all right, Danny? We'll find another way out."

"What if this is our only way out?" says Danny, struggling to stand. He manages to get halfway up before he slides back down to the ground, looking more than a little bit queasy.

"When I said we'll find another way out, I meant it," says Luke, gently placing his hands on Danny's shoulders. "But until then, you've got to save your strength. You've lost too much of it already to afford to lose more."

Danny lets out a slow, tired breath. "Okay," he says, reluctantly. "But it's my turn to watch. You haven't slept in days."

"I *napped*," says Luke, a little offended.

"That doesn't count," says Danny. "Come on, go to sleep. I'll keep watch."

"You—"

"—look like shit, you told me," says Danny. "You too. Now get some sleep or I swear, bulletproof or not, I'll *make* you sleep."

Luke sighs, but takes Danny's advice anyway, slumping against Danny's side and shutting his eyes.

He's out cold in a minute, maybe less, and dreams of coffee with Claire.

28. if you hold your ground it'll turn around

Summary for the Chapter:

“Colleen and Claire, they’re coming. Just hold on for a little while longer.”

“Tell them to hurry,” says Danny. “We’re running out of tricks against these monsters.”

Notes for the Chapter:

title from Jackson Browne's "Hold On Hold Out".

my sympathies.

“So,” says Max, “you have superpowers.”

Jones turns her head to look at her, and flatly says, “You just noticed?”

“Oh, no, I’ve actually been dying to talk to you about that,” says Max. Malcolm’s in the backseat of the car, scrolling through his phone and making calls—she can hear him urging someone to leave town, at least for the weekend, something bad is going down. “No one just gets superpowers right off the bat. What happened, exactly?”

“Nelson didn’t tell you?” says Jones.

“Not a thing,” says Max, and she won’t lie, the knowledge that Dustin’s keeping more than just their secrets tastes bitter on her tongue. Weighs heavy, too. She’s got a feeling it’s not just attorney-client privilege keeping him from coming clean. “All I know about you is that you’re a PI, who by the way *stalks people*, don’t think I forgot that, and you punch like a freight train.”

Jones takes out her flask, unscrews the cap. “I got into an accident,” she says, simply.

“That’s it?” says Max, incredulous. Of all the—she’s told Jones about her involvement with the Upside Down, hasn’t she? The woman can

afford to trust her a little. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

“How much of it is currently relevant to what we’re up to?” Jones asks, which—damn, she isn’t wrong. Max sighs, and lets her head fall back against her headrest.

Malcolm, from the backseat, says, “So—you’re Hargrove’s stepsister?”

“Unfortunately,” says Max.

“Wow,” says Malcolm. “My sympathies.”

“Thanks,” says Max. “He was your dealer once?”

“Unfortunately,” says Malcolm, wincing. “I got—pretty bad, those times. He was a dick, even for a guy selling heroin.”

“Wow,” says Max, shaking her head. “My sympathies.”

“Thanks,” Malcolm says, wryly. “And he was always like that?”

“He’s always been a dick,” says Max, turning right. “He got angrier after we moved to Hawkins, and I used to—I used to be so terrified of him, you know? I hated him and his dad, but I was scared too. He had this—this way, of kind of worming into my head.”

“You hated him,” says Jones, distantly, staring out the window, “but you couldn’t get him out of your head. It felt like trying to clean fungus from a window.”

“Or trying to get clean,” says Malcolm. Max chances a look at the rear view mirror, and sees the haunted look in his eyes.

“Yeah,” says Max, pulling up to the curb near the corner of 9th and 43rd. “It feels a lot like that.” She steps out of the Mustang, leans on the roof as she looks up at the run-down apartment building Billy’s apparently living in now. Twenty years ago, her heart would’ve started beating faster, clawing at her ribcage. Now, she simply—doesn’t feel anything more, beyond a vague sense of annoyance at Billy.

That’s a lie. She’s pissed at him too. Nobody threatens her friends and

gets away with it. *Nobody*.

"If you want," says Jones, "you can get first crack at him."

"I already did," says Max. "I threatened his balls with a nailbat. Malcolm?"

"I can't punch worth a damn," says Malcolm. "But I could talk to him first. Chances are he'll talk to me slightly better than he'll talk to either of you."

"I'll be right behind you," says Jones, with a shrug. "Can't afford another secretary, anyway."

"You can barely afford to pay me," Malcolm says, but a corner of his mouth is turning upward in a crooked smile.

Jones doesn't quite smile back, but her mouth twitches. She shuts the door, tips some more alcohol down her throat.

Max falls in step behind her, her hand sneaking into her pocket. Her fingers slip into the brass knuckles she's brought along, just in case. Just in case.

What had Dustin said again, about one of his clients running into a mind-controlling asshole?

She wonders if that same client's the woman who sat in her passenger seat, the whole time.

--

running out of tricks.

Danny's keeping watch when he hears the woman's voice once more.

He freezes in place. Luke, asleep beside him, doesn't move an inch, unmindful of the woman's voice or of Danny getting to his feet. If he summons the Iron Fist—

He can't. Damn it, he can't. Luke's right. Every time he summons the Fist in this hellhole, he gets weaker and weaker. His strength is

already running low, he can't afford to draw on what little he's got left to shout at what he's certain is a hallucination. Or a trick.

"—Rand? Mr. Rand?"

"Who are you?" Danny asks. He means for it to be forceful, but it sounds weak instead, hoarse even to him. He has to steady himself, press his hand against the nearest wall so he doesn't collapse. Some protector of the city he's making.

"My name's Jane," says the woman, and Danny squints—his vision might not be the most reliable at the moment, but he could swear he sees the thin outline of a woman, with brown curls and earthy eyes. "My friends call me El. Where are you?"

"Danny?" Luke mumbles, stirring awake.

Danny rushes to his friend's side, and says, "Luke, you should go back to sleep—"

"Who's that?" says Luke, squinting at the woman's outline as she steps closer, kneels down.

Danny's jaw drops.

"Astral projection," he whispers.

"Astral *what now*," says Luke.

"She's projecting her consciousness here!" says Danny, a little excited. He'd heard about this in K'un-Lun, but his studies had never gone this way—they'd focused more on martial arts than magical arts, in the end.

Luke, because Luke has never seen anything even vaguely like astral projection anywhere, just stares at Danny like he's more than a little concerned about Danny's health.

Jane seems to cock her head, as if listening to something that Danny can't see. "Colleen wants to know if you're safe," she says, and Colleen's name is like a punch to his gut. It's been so long since he last saw her, since he last heard her voice. "She says she's coming to

find you, but we have to know—where are you?”

“You know Colleen?” says Danny. “Tell her—we’re okay, but we’re not safe, we’re trying to find our way out—”

“Claire,” says Luke, more alert now, “where is she?”

“She’s here with me too,” Jane assures them. “She’s worried for you. She wants to know if you’re okay.”

“I’m—I’m doing okay,” says Luke. “We’re doing as okay as we can be.” He hesitates a moment, then says, “We’re near Midland Circle. We can see the site from here.”

“Where is *here*?” says Jane. “We need a location. Another landmark.”

“We’re just outside Greek restaurant just a block down,” says Danny. “It’s, um—the Ah-rete?”

Jane huffs out a breath, and says, “Areté. That’s what it’s called. Dustin brought us there not too long ago, I know where that is.” She lifts her chin up, as if listening to something, then breathes out. “Colleen and Claire, they’re coming. Just hold on for a little while longer.”

“Tell them to hurry,” says Danny. “We’re running out of tricks against these monsters.”

“And tell them,” says Luke, quiet, “be careful. These things aren’t picky about what they eat.” His lips press together into a thin line, and he says, “Tell Claire I love her.”

“They know,” says Jane. “And she knows.” She looks to Danny.

“Tell Colleen I miss her,” says Danny. “We miss them. We’re coming home soon, I promise. I promise.”

Jane nods, and fades away, like so much dust in the wind.

Luke leans back against his palms and says, “They’re gonna be okay. Claire’s one of the strongest people I know.”

“I know,” says Danny. “So’s Colleen.” She’s fought the Hand alongside him, rebelled against the teachings that they’d tried to instill in her since she was young. That takes strength, more strength than some people are even capable of. “It’s just—you saw those things. You saw that spider, those dogs, that *monster* without a face.”

Luke nods, jaw tight. He’s imagined the same scenarios as Danny has, apparently. “How far out does this safe zone go, do you think?” he says.

“A block, maybe a little more than that,” says Danny. “We could start looking for doorways here.” There is one doorway, of course, down the hole where Midland Circle used to be, but—the previous Iron Fist must’ve closed it for an important reason, beyond simply the bones of a dragon.

Though that is a pretty important reason, just by itself.

“All right,” says Luke, staggering to his feet and steadying himself against a nearby wall. “Let’s go find our way home.”

29. you say you want a revelation

Summary for the Chapter:

Will lets out a breath. "I've been talking to the Devil of Hell's Kitchen," he says. "I've been trying to get him to help me find Jonathan."

There's a full minute's silence.

Then Dustin nearly shouts, "You've been talking to who?!"

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from The Distillers' "Hall of Mirrors".

devil's advocate.

The Devil of Hell's Kitchen clambers back up the rooftop, more than a little bit agitated. Will watches him leave, and waits a few minutes before he pulls out his phone.

Bruno's texted again: *coming 2 nj anytime soon?* Will smiles down at his screen as he leans against the wall of the alleyway, butterflies swooping in his stomach. One day he'll have to thank Kamala for introducing him to her friend.

For now, he texts back, *can't, have a thing to do.*

Bruno texts back a smiling emoji, and for a moment Will feels as light as a feather. He should tell Jonathan about this, should tell him about Bruno—

The thought brings him crashing back down. Jonathan isn't here, not right now. There's only Will, and. Well, the Devil of Hell's Kitchen, apparently.

At least he's sure that's the Devil of Hell's Kitchen he just talked to, who just asked him to please *keep Foggy Nelson away from his apartment*. It's vague as hell and it barely tells Will anything about

what's probably waiting for Dustin at his apartment, but it does tell him this:

The Devil cares a lot about Dustin.

The sign swims up to the forefront of his mind: *Nelson & Murdock*.

Dustin had hidden Dart, when they were fourteen. Will had only found out later, after all was said and done, that against everyone's advice, Dustin had still brought Dart—a creature from the Upside Down, a baby demogorgon—back home, because they'd bonded. Because Dustin had thought Dart was his friend.

Dustin's got a history of keeping his friends' secrets, even from his other friends. If Matt Murdock's a vigilante—or *was* a vigilante, it goes without saying that Dustin would've kept that secret safe and sound. No matter what.

Because Murdock's his friend.

Will dials Dustin's number.

"Hey, Will," says Dustin, sounding slightly annoyed. *"You will not believe who Brett had to save from getting strangled in his own cell by the key witness in my case."*

"Who?" says Will, a little sidetracked.

"Fucking Troy, of all people!" says Dustin.

Will presses his lips together. On the one hand, he wouldn't have missed Troy at all, the guy had tried to chloroform him. On the other hand, that would've been a terrible way to go out, even for Troy, who's maybe the third worst person that Will has ever known. "What happened?" he says instead.

"Brett's pretty sure the guy who attempted to strangle Troy to death was Manolis, and right now Manolis is the key witness in the case against me, which is a hell of a coincidence if it is one," says Dustin. *"Lucas thinks it's connected to Steve, Nancy and Jonathan. We're gonna see if Troy's willing to talk to someone once he wakes up. If we could flip him—"*

"We could find Jonathan, Steve and Nancy," says Will. "We could clear your name while we're at it!"

"Best news I've gotten in days," says Dustin, "and it's about Troy, of all people. Once we take his statement, I'm going back home and celebrating with Chinese takeout." He chuckles over the line, almost genuine. *"Why'd you call me, anyway?"*

Will lets out a breath. "I've been talking to the Devil of Hell's Kitchen," he says. "I've been trying to get him to help me find Jonathan."

There's a full minute's silence.

Then Dustin nearly shouts, *"You've been talking to who?!"*

"The Devil of Hell's Kitchen," says Will. He needs to play this right, say the right thing that'll keep Dustin away from his apartment for the day. "He said some stuff about you that really concerned me, though, and I've been trying to figure out how to let you know."

"Stuff about me? Oh, god, Will—"

"Listen, Dustin," says Will, hating himself a little for ducking behind words, "just—don't go near your apartment today, all right?"

"You put it like that, I don't think I will," says Dustin, sounding more than a little scared. *"Jesus, he's probably waiting to smash a lamp over my head right now. Will, you've got to cut off all contact with this guy. He sounds mental."*

Will's gut churns uneasily, throwing the Devil under the bus like this and letting Dustin think this way, but—Dustin's not going to take Will's "anonymous source" excuse at face value, if it's concerning his apartment. He'll want to go there and check, himself. "I guess," Will says.

"I know you want to find Jonathan," Dustin says, *"but I can't—if something happens to you again, I don't think I can handle it."*

"Nothing is going to happen to me again," says Will. "I promise."

“Okay,” says Dustin. “*Just—be careful, all right?*”

“You too,” says Will. “I’ll see you later.”

“*I’m always careful!*” Dustin huffs. “*I’ll see you later too.*” And with that, the phone clicks off.

Will sighs, and tucks his phone into his pocket. He looks up at the rooftops, half-expecting to see a figure in black, but there’s no one there but the birds.

He turns, and walks out of the alleyway.

--

the fall of midland circle.

El slips the blindfold off her eyes, wipes the blood from her nose with a handkerchief, and says, “They’re near Midland Circle, at the Areté—the Greek restaurant Dustin brought us to.”

Mike scribbles that down into one of Nancy’s spare pads of legal paper. The further they get in this case, the more he’s beginning to wonder if it really is just luck that’s throwing them together, or something more. Fate, maybe.

He dismisses the thought. If anything, the thing that’s tying them all together is just—all these missing people.

And Dustin, of course. God, Mike still can’t believe one of Dustin’s friends has superpowers. And there’s this Daredevil thing that he’s pretty sure El and Will know more about than he does, and not even because Dustin’s told them anything.

Jesus, when did Dustin start keeping things even from them?

“Shit,” says Claire, running her hand through her hair. “Of course they’re near Midland Circle. There’s always *something* going on there.”

“Look at it this way,” says Colleen, her words optimistic even though she looks away at the very name of the place. “Maybe this time we

won't need to blow anything up.”

Mike stares at them, and wonders if Dustin knows anything about this. He feels briefly guilty for even thinking that, but—well, it's been a while. “You guys blew something up the last time you were there?” he says.

Claire chews on her lower lip, as if debating with herself whether to tell them or not. She glances to Colleen, like she wants to ask the question.

Colleen nods, and says, “Yeah. It's a long story, and it involves an ancient and evil organization with the power of resurrecting the dead.”

Claire sighs, reaching up a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. She doesn't look like she doesn't believe it, just—more resigned, than anything. Like she's honestly used to this, and Mike is. Well. Mike is maybe freaking out a little bit, because *resurrection*, Jesus Christ. That's insane, and Mike's life is already pretty damn weird. “She forgets to mention they're ninjas,” she says, which is even weirder.

Jane says, “Wait, *resurrecting*?”

“That sounds like something right out of a comic book,” says Mike, trying to square the idea of an ancient organization of ninjas resurrecting people from the dead for unknown purposes with his entire worldview. It's—a little hard, to say the least. “Also, ninjas? Really?”

“And flesh-eating monsters from another dimension doesn't sound like something from a sci-fi movie?” says Claire, which, point. Mike runs his hand through his hair, and briefly wonders what the hell is taking Will so long to get up here.

Maybe he should head downstairs, take a look.

“You forgot the psychic children,” El reminds Claire.

“I didn't forget,” says Claire, “that's just not the weirdest part of your story.” She pauses, then sighs deeply. “That's not something I ever thought I'd be saying,” she says, and if Mike stops to think about it—

damn it, she's right.

"Can we go back to the part where you *blew up a building*, apparently," says Mike, "or is that something we're not supposed to know about?"

"The Hand—the organization I was talking about—" starts Colleen, just as Will opens the door and blinks at them.

"The what now?" he says. "Did I miss anything?"

"You missed ninjas," Mike informs him. *Also Claire and Colleen might've blown a building up, I'm not completely sure yet*, he doesn't say, because—Jesus, no matter which way you look at it, blowing up a building's a crime.

Then again, they were fugitives from the government for a time at thirteen, so Mike supposes he can't throw stones here.

"*What*," says Will. "Like, comic book-style ninjas?"

"A whole organization full of them," El says.

"You're kidding me," says Will.

Colleen shrugs, and says, "I'm not." She breathes out, then, with a brief look to Claire, begins in a tone that's so deliberately neutral that there's no way it's not personal: "They called themselves the Hand, and at the height of their strength they had a building erected and hid behind Midland Circle Financial, in order to gather more money and power to themselves..."

And so Mike finds himself sitting on the couch in his sister's apartment, listening to Colleen and Claire tell the story: of an ancient and incredibly evil organization that began in the wake of exile from—somewhere Colleen doesn't tell them about, the members all yearning for immortality and willing to do everything they could to gain it, of how they killed and brainwashed and tortured and *lied* to get their way, of their identity as Midland Circle Financial and what they were truly up to. Colleen tells of her life inside the Hand, of how she broke away from its influence at great cost and with some help from a friend, and Mike feels El's hand slip into his and squeeze tight.

("You're not much of a ninja, though," says Will.

"I'm a samurai, I follow the bushido code," says Colleen. "There's a difference.")

Claire takes up the story in places where Colleen doesn't know, or where she falters like she can't quite tell it yet. She tells of how the Hand broke into her hospital and killed a good friend, of how fanatical the followers seemed to be, of their mercilessness in dealing with their opponents and any other obstacles in their way.

They tell of what happened at Midland Circle—what *really* happened, Mike finds out, because multiple explosives placed in strategic locations is definitely not an earthquake. Colleen tells of facing her sensei again, Claire tells of having to carry their cop friend out, and they tell of Jessica and Luke and Danny and Daredevil, fighting against an army of ninjas.

She tells of four going inside, and three coming out.

If Mike didn't know any better, he'd call it a story, straight out of a comic book. Or a homebrew campaign, with a party of superheroes.

But he can see the aftereffects, even six months on. He can see how Colleen's grip tightens on the hilt of the sword at her hip, as she talks about her sensei. He can see the grief in the slump of Claire's shoulders, the downward twist of her mouth.

He can hear the faltering, and he knows what it sounds like when someone's trying to keep a few more secrets.

The story finishes, and Colleen says, "Anyone have any questions?"

"Was Daredevil in an all-black outfit?" says Will.

Colleen frowns, and says, "No, he was wearing this leather armor. Pretty dark red, helmet with horns."

"He used to wear an all-black outfit, though," says Claire, distantly. Like she's remembering something—Mike's not sure what. Hell, she hadn't deigned to tell them how she, a nurse, even got involved in this mess with ninjas in the first place. "It was just—pants, a black

shirt, a mask. Why?"

Will sighs. "I've talked with him a few times," he says.

"Wait, wait," Mike interrupts, "the—you think the guy who took you off to a creepy abandoned apartment—"

"It wasn't that creepy," says Will.

"Your standards for creepy are way off," El informs him.

"—he's the actual *Daredevil*?" Mike finishes. "And—you've been in *contact* with him?"

"You talked to Daredevil?" says Claire, alarmed. "How the—he got a building *dropped on him*. You're sure it's the real deal?"

"He seemed pretty concerned about Dustin," says Will, a little too casual, and Mike frowns at him. Okay, so Daredevil's concerned about Dustin. It's not as if they're best friends.

He turns to El, and there's a look on her face like the light's just dawned on her. He looks at Claire, and she's gone completely still, the same way Dustin did when Will had held the sign in his hands—

Oh.

It's barely a connection, barely even a thread, nothing more than circumstantial evidence. Mike's not even sure of it himself, not the way Will seems to be. But he wonders if the Murdock half of Nelson & Murdock isn't quite as missing, or dead, as Dustin seems to think he is.

"Daredevil is a little close to Nelson's old law firm," says Colleen. "At least that's what the rumors said. They tended to deny it whenever they were asked."

Of course they would. Vigilantes and lawyers aren't supposed to be working together.

"If he is the real deal," says Claire, apparently recovering, "he probably wants to protect one of the few people who might be

willing to take his case on. But I don't think he is."

"Why not?" El asks. "You mentioned it yourself, there's an evil organization that can bring people back from the dead." She drums her fingers on her lap and says, "Maybe someone who wasn't there brought him back."

"Hard to do," says Colleen, "because the last time I checked, all of the Hand's leadership and New York personnel died in the collapse." She folds her arms across her chest. "And collapsing buildings—they don't tend to leave a lot, in terms of bodies."

"It can't be that hard to believe," says Mike. "I mean, with everything we've all seen?"

Claire licks her lips. She says, "Regardless of whether or not that's Daredevil—we still need to find Luke and Danny. If they're in that Upside Down place, in the Areté—maybe we can get them out of there."

"The question is," says Will, "how're we going to do that?"

"Could you find portals?" says Colleen to El, who huffs out a breath. Mike scoots closer to her, touches the inside of her elbow, reassuring.

She smiles back at him. *I know*, she doesn't say.

"Maybe," she allows, turning back to Claire and Colleen. "Those would be harder, I'm more used to finding people and things in one plane or another, not the gateways between, but—I can try." She lifts her chin up, and even twenty years on, Mike's still a little blown away by even that little motion, the sheer determination in that lift, the fire in her eyes. "If we go there, I might be able to find a way in."

Notes for the Chapter:

since I posted this on Christmas, I might as well add this:

lmk which bits in the future of the story or the past you want to see, and I'll write something! consider it a Christmas present.

leave it here in the comments or in my askbox. I'm @
skymurdock on tumblr.

30. hard to breathe when you're standing on your own

Summary for the Chapter:

"Ms. Jones, how far could you throw a fully-grown man?"

"As far as the window," says Jessica. "At least."

"Can we save the tossing through windows for when I'm not here?" says Malcolm.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Augustana's "Hey Now".

cw for literally everything that Billy Hargrove spews, unfortunately.

not here for a hit.

"Well, well," says Billy Hargrove, looking smugly down at Malcolm when the door swings open, "I knew you'd come back one day for a hit. Couldn't stay on the wagon long, could you?"

Malcolm sighs, and says, "I'm not here for a hit, Billy. I'm here because someone I know is missing."

"If you're not here for a hit, Ducasse," says Billy, leaning against the doorway and crossing his arms, casual and cool, "get the fuck out of here."

"Yeah, I can't do that," says Malcolm. "Jonathan Byers is a friend of mine."

Billy's entire posture goes completely rigid. *Gotcha*, Malcolm thinks, triumphant, and it sounds like Jessica's voice. "Don't know who that is," Billy says, deceptively casual.

"I think you do," says Jessica, coming up the steps.

"I know you do," says Max, just behind her.

Billy's jaw goes a little slack, and for the first time in a while, Malcolm sees the flash of real fear behind his eyes. He's not sure who Billy's more scared of: Jessica, or his stepsister.

"So you haven't got the balls to ask me straight," says Billy, recovering admirably. "Instead you had to bring in Jessica Jones and my own fucking stepsister. Can't fight your own battles, huh?" He looks at Max, and drawls, "You know, I thought that when you finally ditched Sinclair, you'd improve your tastes a little. Not go down further."

"This doesn't need to be a battle, Billy," says Malcolm.

"It's cute that ten years after he and I got married, you still think I should ditch Lucas," Max snidely says. "Oh, and—didn't Jonathan kick your ass graduation day?"

Billy's face goes from carefully neutral to straight-up murderous, and Malcolm has to step in between them before the man can start forward after his stepsister.

"We just want answers," says Malcolm. He hopes to god there's not going to be a battle, but considering this is Billy Hargrove in the same space as Jessica and Max, he's certain there's going to be one. "Come on, man. Can't be that hard to point us in Jonathan's general direction if you know it, right?"

"And if I don't know it?" says Billy. His eyes flick to Max, as if challenging her.

Malcolm glances back, just in time to see Max mouthing to Jessica, *all yours*. He steps aside, and lets Jessica barrel forward and lift Billy up into the air by the collar of his shirt.

"Listen here, you mullet-wearing shit-licker," says Jessica, "we could all be doing better things with our time than be here, talking to *you*. But you have something we need, and I'd advise you to think carefully about answering the next question I have for you."

Billy makes a tiny little keening noise.

"I can't hear you," says Max. "Ms. Jones, how far could you throw a fully-grown man?"

"As far as the window," says Jessica. "At least."

"Can we save the tossing through windows for when I'm not here?" says Malcolm.

"Just go downstairs, then," says Jessica, a hint of annoyance in her tone. It maybe has something to do with the way Billy keeps flailing around as she walks into his apartment.

His head knocks against the doorway. Malcolm could swear she did that on purpose.

"This is *illegal*—" Billy starts, which, ha, rich.

"Says the drug dealer," says Jessica.

"Since when did you care about what's legal?" says Max, kicking at a loose floorboard to expose packets of white dust, prescription bottles, the works. Malcolm looks quickly away from them, his gut churning just a little, the old need a dull and easily-ignored itch. "Also, where's Steve? Jonathan? Nancy? I could remind you what they look like, if you want, I have a picture right here."

"What makes you think I'd tell any of you?" snarls Billy.

"Should probably get out of here, Malcolm," says Jessica, "if you want to retain plausible deniability."

"Hey, Ms. Jones, do you think you could hit the window or a wall?" says Max, and Malcolm sees Billy go pale, flailing even more. It's not that effective, considering Jessica's barely even shaken.

Jessica cocks her head to the side. "Probably a wall," she says.

Malcolm turns away.

Billy says, "Jesus *fucking* Christ, okay, okay!"

"Say it," says Max, deadly calm. Malcolm turns back, and sees her

looking up at her stepbrother like he's about as noteworthy as the next anonymous dealer. "Say you'll tell us where they are. *Say it.*"

"I'll tell you where they are!" says Billy. "Just put me down, you crazy fucking bitch—"

Jessica lets go of him, turns to the loose floorboard to gather up the contents. He drops to the floor, hard, as Max steps closer and kneels down.

"Second strike," she says, pleasantly. "I'm feeling generous. Don't even think about incurring a third strike."

Billy gulps, and tells them: a lab, near Midland Circle's remains. Jessica crushes a syringe in her hand, glass shards cutting into her palm, and Malcolm feels dread drop into the bottom of his stomach even as he tells himself that *it won't be like last time*. Midland Circle is gone, and so is the Hand and the woman in black, and so is the threat that they posed.

So his heart should stop beating like it's trying to claw its way out of his chest. It should, but it's still doing it anyway, and Jessica curses, heads into the bathroom—Malcolm hears the flush, more cursing, before she emerges empty-handed and less bloody.

"We need to go," she tells Max.

"What?" says Max.

"Quick meeting with Nelson and the rest," says Jessica, her non-injured hand on Malcolm's back as she steers him away from Billy. "Jesus, Midland *fucking* Circle."

"First we bandage your hand," says Malcolm, rallying.

"My hand's fine," says Jessica. "I'll get Claire to look at it. They're at the Wonder Trio's place, right?"

"Yeah, they are," says Max, as they go down the stairs. "At least when I last checked. Let me call them."

They step out into the New York streets. Malcolm looks up at the

rooftops, and for a moment he could swear there's a figure on the rooftops watching them—but he blinks, and the figure is gone.

Jesus. Must be the heat, getting to him. Must be this case. Must be.

--

what comes next?

A lab near Midland Circle. That's—actually helpful, and lines up with what Byers said about Trainer's research development hub.

The problem now, Matt thinks, as he carefully steps into the empty apartment he's been using as a safehouse, is getting inside the lab. No doubt they'll be on the lookout for a man in black, snooping around, and he can't—he can't go inside as Matt Murdock, lawyer. He's kind of dead, technically.

So, first things first: he needs to know the security guards' patrol routes. Which, damn it, means he'll have to stake out the place sometime soon. With Fisk targeting Foggy this much, Matt's half-afraid Foggy'll get shot or something, if he's not around to stop it.

But—he's got Jessica, right now, at least. He's got his friends, Byers among them. He's even still got Brett, who Matt is pretty sure may be the only cop in Hell's Kitchen worth trusting, at this point. There is Misty Knight, but she's in *Harlem*.

Matt pulls the mask off and sighs. He runs fingers over his torso, checking for gaping wounds, and finds nothing except a shallow cut easily patched up with a band-aid. Byers had given up on stitches and just told him to not run around so much, putting something soft over the wound. It still itches and pulls, enough that Matt hisses in pain, but it's workable.

In the back of his mind, he can hear Claire's voice, saying, *Really? You're going with that?*

He laughs, ruefully. The sound echoes oddly off the slowly-crumbling walls.

He'd go to Claire, usually, but he's brought enough trouble to her

doorstep. And Foggy—

God, Foggy.

Foggy doesn't deserve whatever's happening to him right now because of Fisk's vendetta, just as much as Matt definitely doesn't deserve him. But unlike Matt, Fisk doesn't seem interested in leaving Foggy alone.

The irony of the entire situation is not lost on Matt.

Then there's this Upside Down. He'll have to ask Byers about that, he supposes, once he's staked out the place. But first he needs to—

His stomach growls.

Okay, first he needs to eat. If he remembers right, there's a soup kitchen in a church on 12th Avenue. He tugs the hood back up over his head and clambers down the fire escape, and out into the streets.

He stops near a manhole, frowns for a moment. It's strange, for a moment he thought he smelled something—off, down the manhole, but before he can truly pinpoint it, the stench of shit and sewage overwhelms his nose again. He starts walking once more, deciding not to pay it any attention for the meantime.

(He's too far out of range to hear the otherworldly shrieks ringing out moments later, from far below.)

31. a way to escape the day

Summary for the Chapter:

“You can’t—You can’t run, not from him, ‘s’not possible. Not if you failed him.”

“We’ve got a pretty good idea what we’re up against, actually, thanks,” says Jonathan, evenly. “We’ve been working this story a while.”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from MS MR's "Bones".

what we're up against.

Of all the things Nancy expected to do today, making sure the injured man thrown into their cell doesn't fucking *die* on them had definitely not been one of them, but hey! Here she is anyway, doing exactly that.

“Stay *awake*,” she snaps to the man—Manolis, apparently, his name's Manolis, and Steve had taken one look at him and called him the shithead who'd left his son in Trainer's hands. Among other things.

Apparently this guy's the star witness in the case against Dustin, and if this is how Fisk treats his star witnesses, no fucking wonder he lost against two hotshot lawyers from Hell's Kitchen. He's got to learn to treat his minions better.

“Can't say I disagree with that,” Steve says, and oh, right, he can read minds now. “Wait—you didn't say that.”

“I didn't *leave him*,” says Manolis, but he sounds increasingly doubtful. Must be the concussion. “I think. I don't—I didn't want to.”

“And yet you did anyway,” Jonathan says. “Hey, do you know anything about this place?”

Manolis blinks owlishly at them. “I—I think so,” he says, and keeping

him alive has just become number one priority. Nancy smacks his shoulder once more, just to keep him from drifting off and passing out on them. “Why?”

“We need to get out of here,” says Nancy, “so either you tell us how to get out of here, or we do this the hard way.”

“Y’don’t know what you’re up against,” says Manolis, words slurring slightly, but it doesn’t sound like a threat. It sounds more like he’s *terrified*, and Nancy’s got a good idea who he’s scared of: the same man who must’ve either had him pounded to a pulp or did it himself. “You can’t—You can’t *run*, not from him, ‘s’not possible. Not if you failed him.”

“We’ve got a pretty good idea what we’re up against, actually, thanks,” says Jonathan, evenly. “We’ve been working this story a while.”

“We know one of the lawyers who took him down before,” says Nancy. Dustin had never taken the Murdock half of his little firm with him to the occasional reunion, unfortunately, but Dustin—she knows him pretty well. “It’s been done before, it can be done again.”

“That’s why he wanted Nelson out of the game!” Manolis says, all but launching himself at Nancy, grabbing her shirt. His eyes are wide with terror, the bone-deep, primal kind that’s going to haunt Nancy’s dreams forever, and it’s the terror that stays with her even as Jonathan and Steve pull Manolis back from her. “And—And revenge, too, god—”

“We also already know he’s a petty little asshole,” says Steve, “so, thanks for the confirmation, I guess.” He pauses a moment, then frowns at Jonathan. “Yeah, I guess we could do it the hard way, but I’m so not a big fan of that.”

“I’m not either, and you just showed why,” Jonathan shoots back. “I didn’t say that out loud.”

“Hard way?” says Manolis, like he’s only just realized what they’ve been discussing.

"We get the information we need straight from your brain," Nancy says, with a shrug, even if the words make her hate herself a little. They need to get out of here fast. "It's not the method I'd prefer either, Steve doesn't have the training and you're concussed, but. If we *have* to."

She lets the implied threat hang over their heads, and tries her hardest not to look at Steve. She catches a glimpse of him anyway, and he's watching her with the same kind of heartbreak on his face that she half-remembers from years and years ago. *Bullshit.*

She swallows, and pushes the thought to the forefront of her mind: *I'm sorry.*

Manolis pauses for a moment, as if he's turning the idea over in his head. Then he says, "If I agree to—to do this. To tell you where to go. I need a—a thing, what's it called—"

"Favor," Jonathan supplies.

"Yeah, that," says Manolis. "My kid. 'S'name's Jacob. He's a *good* kid, if they—I gotta. I gotta make sure he's safe. He's gotta be *safe*."

"You want us to get him out," says Nancy.

"Yeah," says Steve, almost immediately, because if there's anything Nancy's learned about Steve in the years the three of them have been orbiting around each other, it's that Steve's a sucker for kids in trouble. It's all that time keeping Mike and Dustin and the rest of the Party safe. "Yes, we'll get your kid out. That sound like a fair trade to you guys?"

It does, is the thing. Nancy's initial plan hadn't factored in the kid beyond a nebulous hope that once they were outside, they could get some assistance, but she's not going to leave this kid alone in the company of Carolyn Trainer and Wilson Fisk at all, if she can help it. "Yes," she says.

"I'm in," says Jonathan. "Manolis?" He frowns. "Nance, we better keep an eye on him."

Nancy sighs, and smacks Manolis awake once more. "We need you

conscious,” she says. “You pass out with a concussion, we’re screwed.”

--

friends don't lie.

Karen gets the e-mail early in the morning from an address she doesn’t recognize at first. For a moment, she’s ready to mark it as spam, but then she squints at the subject line: *Nancy’s Notes*.

Foggy’s friend came through, then. Karen opens the e-mail, reads the perfunctory greeting and the plea from Mike Wheeler to send any leads on his sister his way, and downloads the file attached.

She spends most of her morning reading over what Nancy’s gathered on the Trainer case. Or an edited version of what she’s gathered, anyway—there’s a few too many details that don’t quite tie together the way they should. It’s sloppy reporting, the kind Nancy would never do, and that perhaps is what tips her off: Nancy’s brother is hiding something from her. Something important.

She wants to think Foggy doesn’t know about that. She wants to think Foggy believes his friend would give her the unedited version. She wants to.

But she knows the lengths Foggy’s willing to go to, for his friends. It’s not impossible that he counted on Mike Wheeler editing his sister’s notes, and that knowledge sticks in her throat, tastes a little like bile going the wrong way. You’d think she’s earned a little bit of trust.

She has to remind herself that this isn’t about trust, per se. If Foggy does know about Nancy’s brother editing her notes, then most likely he believes it’s in Karen’s best interests to keep her in the dark. If he doesn’t—well, she’ll be pleasantly surprised if he doesn’t, considering his track record.

She sighs, looks at her own notes on the case. Cases. Clearing Foggy’s name is a distinct case all on its own, but it’s getting more and more tangled up with Nancy’s disappearance to the point where Karen can’t help but wonder if they’re not tied into each other somehow.

Nancy hadn't been the only one who disappeared, after all.

The knock on the door jolts Karen out of her thoughts, and she looks up to see the new secretary, Carol, poking her freshly-permed head into the office. "There's a Marci Stahl here to see you, Ms. Page," she says, dispassionately. "Says you received some pictures from her?"

Yeah, those pictures. Karen glances at the edge of the cellphone pictures she printed out, hidden underneath her notes on the Miller scandal, and nudges them underneath. "I did, yeah," she says. "Is she willing to come inside or will I need to step out?"

"She said she wanted to try some Asian fusion shit," says Carol, with some distaste. Karen packs her stuff up and gives Carol a brief goodbye, pushing past her on her way out.

"Miss Page!" says Marci, standing in the middle of the *Bulletin's* lobby like she belongs there. "Did you get my messages?"

"I did, yeah," Karen says, and the two of them step out of the office. "Did you run into any trouble trying to get them?"

"Nah, not that much," says Marci, after a moment spent considering it. They step out onto the sidewalk, and Karen holds her things tighter to herself. "Besides Walters, anyway, and she's something of a people-pleaser."

"She didn't seem that way when I saw her in court," says Karen, remembering the way Walters had torn apart the prosecution's argument, piece by piece by bloody piece.

"She's a completely different person when court's in session," says Marci.

Karen thinks of Matt, then—the man she had loved who ate Chinese food and laughed hard and loud and kissed her slow and sweet under the rain, the man under the horned helmet, the lawyer and the vigilante. "I can believe that," she says. "Did you find anything else out?"

"I dug into the other accusations of witness tampering," says Marci. "There is an incredibly high amount of inconsistencies, once you

really look at them, and save for the pictures with Daredevil, the pictures we get with them are incredibly grainy.”

“So we track down the witnesses,” says Karen, as they walk down the street. “Hell, we—we track down Manolis, get him to turn, we can hit the bastards framing Foggy where it hurts.”

“Should be easy,” says Marci, “Manolis is at the station.”

So that’s where they head, first.

The only problem is:

“He’s not there?” says Marci, to the new sergeant manning the desk. Karen doesn’t know this one, isn’t quite so inclined to trust him.

“He called in sick today,” says the sergeant with a shrug. “Maybe you guys can try again tomorrow.” He looks around at the press still hanging around, asking questions about whatever bullshit has befallen the precinct just today. “Once all these vultures have seen a better feast, anyway,” he grumbles.

Karen knows an opportunity when she hears one. “Why, what happened here?” she asks.

The sergeant shrugs. “Guy nearly got strangled in his own cell by a masked assailant,” he says. “Detective Mahoney saved his life. They’re at the hospital right now.”

Karen’s hand briefly touches her neck. The marks have long since faded, and the memory doesn’t come up so often anymore, but she remembers when she was in this unknown criminal’s position.

But she isn’t here to sympathize with him, she’s here to clear her best friend’s name. “Could we at least have Manolis’ number so we could contact him?” she says. The sergeant acquiesces, so she’s not completely empty-handed, but when she leaves the station with Marci in tow, she’s more than a little bit frustrated.

“Sound a little familiar?” says Marci.

“I do not want to talk about it,” says Karen, harsher than she maybe

should be. Marci startles back a little—*Marci*, who Foggy had always liked to refer to as the friendliest shark he had ever known.

“Wow, okay, definitely not a good topic to touch on, then,” says Marci. “What say we call Foggy-bear and see what he’s up to instead?”

Karen sucks in a breath, holds it like a precious jewel, then lets it go. “Yeah, but I’m out of data and I haven’t yet renegotiated my data plan,” she says, “so—do you still have Foggy’s number?”

Marci sighs. “Yes,” she says.

32. oh how i want to break free

Summary for the Chapter:

He glances up at the door, and says, "And, get this, the guy who got attacked is from Hawkins too! Hell of a coincidence, right?"

"Do you really think it's a coincidence?" says Karen, in a skeptical tone.

Notes for the Chapter:

title from Queen's "I Want To Break Free".

easier with practice.

Of all the people Foggy expects to be calling him while he's at the hospital waiting for his old bully to wake up, his ex-girlfriend is not one of them.

Then again, Marci's always had a way of defying expectations, he supposes. He steps out into the waiting room to take her call, because Brett shoots him a Look when his phone starts to ring and frankly Foggy's too damn tired to argue with Looks.

"Hi, Marci," he says, forcing some cheer into his tone. He's a fucking champion at this forced cheer thing by now, he should have some kind of award for it. "What's up?"

"Hi, Foggy-bear," says Marci, sounding cheerfully assholeish as always. Foggy sighs, and feels something unknot within his stomach. "Your girl and I got to talking."

Hey, Karen did do what she said she would. "She isn't my girl," says Foggy.

"Seriously? Neither of you have ever—"

"Nope," says Foggy, hurriedly. "Karen's my friend, that's all. And I asked her to reach out to you if she could, because—" He falters, then

sighs. "Because I didn't want to drag you into this mess."

"That is so noble and sweet of you," says Marci, falsely saccharine. *"Not to mention very stupid."*

Foggy sighs. Leave it to Marci to be blunt about what she thinks, he supposes, but he's pretty sure given the chance to do it over again, he'd still try to keep her in the dark. She's already risked her career for him once, he's not going to pull her down with him again, and with the Upside Down involved now—

The old anxiety bubbles up in his throat, tasting like bile. He swallows it down, and says, "So does that mean you're in?"

"It means that you owe me a nice lunch at a restaurant that's at least slightly better than your usual hole in the wall," says Marci. *"And, yes, it means I'm in."*

"That's—Thanks," says Foggy. "Really. I just—I know I don't deserve it—"

"Definitely not," says Marci, and Foggy resists the urge to roll his eyes out of instinct. Then he remembers: she's not here anyway. He rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. *"But you also don't deserve to get dragged through the mud on the basis of pure bullshit, either. Consider this a repayment of all the frankly amazing sex we used to have."*

Foggy huffs out a laugh, stuffs a hand into his pocket. "Gee, thanks," he says. "Hey, uh, Marci, listen, after all of this is over—Karen and I know this diner on 48th. It's not a hole in the wall, so it meets your exacting standards, and it also doesn't burn too big a hole in my wallet. Or. Hopefully it won't, I'm a little broke right now."

"Are you asking me on a date?" says Marci.

"God, no, I think we've definitively established that we're just never going to work," says Foggy. "It's more—you're my friend, Marci, and I want to keep that."

"That is a horribly optimistic way of putting it," says Marci, acidly. *"Especially given the past six months."*

He winces. “Yeah, I know,” he says. “Let me make it up to you?”

“I hope this diner has something better than those poutines you’re into,” says Marci, and Foggy’s sigh this time is more relieved than unhappy. At least she’s helping. At least she’s open to being friends. *“I’ll see you around? Hopefully more often now.”*

“Of course,” says Foggy. “Is Karen there with you? I’d like to talk to her.”

“As a matter of fact, she is!” says Marci. *“Hold on just a second,”* she adds, and Foggy has to wait for the muffled conversation to finish before he hears Karen’s voice: *“Foggy! Hey, you okay?”*

“I’m fine,” Foggy reassures her. “I’m at the hospital right now—not for me, don’t worry.”

“Considering how your week’s been going so far? I’m surprised you’re not injured,” says Karen. *“Thank god you’re not, though.”*

Foggy huffs out a laugh, and sits down in one of the chairs provided for patients’ visitors. “Thank god,” he echoes. “I’m just here because someone connected to both my case and Nancy’s is currently laid up recovering from nearly getting strangled.”

“Wait, you were there?” says Karen. *“We just stopped by the precinct asking after Brett.”*

“I wasn’t there,” Foggy says. “My friend Lucas and I dropped by after all the action passed.” He glances up at the door, and says, “And, get this, the guy who got attacked is from Hawkins too! Hell of a coincidence, right?”

“Do you really think it’s a coincidence?” says Karen, in a skeptical tone.

“I really wish it was, but I’m beginning to think it isn’t,” says Foggy, dropping the cheer and rubbing a hand over his forehead. *Beginning to*, ha. He already knows. “Hey, Karen, listen: be careful, all right? You and Marci—I don’t wanna lose you guys to this.”

Not the way he lost Matt. God, please, never that way again.

"You won't lose us," says Karen. "Just—don't pull away again, okay? Don't keep secrets from your friends because you want to protect them. Trust us to protect ourselves, Foggy."

Under other circumstances, it wouldn't be a lie. Under this set, though, he lies with practiced ease and guilt settling heavy in his stomach: "I won't."

When he steps back into the hospital room, he absently smooths out the sleeves of his jacket. There's nothing that can be done for his face, he hasn't shaven in days and he's slept the minimum amount of hours to keep functioning, but hell if he'll talk to Troy looking like he just woke up from hibernation.

"You look like shit," says Brett, brow furrowing in concern. "You sure you wanna stay here and talk to him? You're not exactly obliged to be here."

"I don't wanna be here either," says Lucas. "But he's got information, and neither of us are leaving until we've got it."

"Better hurry it up before the DA's guy gets here," says Brett, standing up. "I'll sit outside, let you guys know when to scram."

"Thanks, Brett," says Lucas.

"Don't thank me," Brett grumbles. "My mom's been badgering me about her cigars again."

Foggy snorts out a laugh as Brett leaves. "He throws out the cigars whenever he can," he says. "He thinks I don't know, but I talked to Bess once and she's been complaining regularly about it. I've been passing cigars directly to her."

"You're a real smooth operator, Dustin," says Lucas, as Foggy slides into Brett's previous seat. "So who was that, on the phone?"

"Marci and Karen," says Foggy.

"*That* Marci?" says Lucas, raising his eyebrows. "The one who broke your heart so badly you Skyped me drunk and cried about dying alone?"

Foggy reaches over to smack his friend's shoulder, and gets a hard smack to his own in return. "Watch the gunshot wound!" he complains, even if in truth it doesn't ache at all anymore. Except when it's stupidly humid. "And yes, that one."

"Can't hurt that badly," Lucas shoots back. "And seriously? *Dustin*."

"We're not getting back together," says Foggy. "Again, anyway. She just called me about my case, and then she passed the phone over to Karen."

"You need any more help with clearing your name?" says Lucas, and the bitch of it is—he'd help, Foggy knows that. Him, and the rest of the Party, too. Hell, under normal circumstances, Foggy would even accept the help, god knows he needs all that he can get even just to get himself through the next few days.

But these aren't normal circumstances. The Upside Down is in *New York*, and Foggy's got a feeling things are going to get much worse than some rotten pumpkins now. Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy are still missing, and they're rapidly running out of time. Fisk is back, apparently.

Stack all of those up against his personal troubles, and frankly, his own shit just pales in comparison.

"Maybe when we get Steve back," he says, just as Troy moans from the bed, coming awake at last.

Oh, boy.

--

they almost made it.

On an ordinary day, the Areté's just another New York restaurant offering Greek and Mediterranean cuisine with a twist. Who knows what the twist is, because Claire certainly doesn't.

This isn't an ordinary day, though. She steps past the open doors first, and blinks at the flood of repairmen going past. "Uh, hey," she says, as Will, Colleen, Jane and Mike stumble inside after her. "I was told

you guys served some damn good, uh—”

“Kofta,” Mike supplies.

“Kofta,” says Claire.

The greeter, a slightly frazzled young woman, beams at Mike. “Yes, we do!” she says, sounding relieved. “Welcome to the Areté, by the way. We’re so sorry for the inconvenience, but we started experiencing electrical issues.”

Colleen steps aside to let a man with a ladder through. “Like—flickering lights?” she says.

“Oh, yes,” says the greeter. “But don’t worry! We’ll get it fixed in no time at all.”

“I could take a look at it,” says Will, seemingly innocent. “My stepdad taught me how to do repairs.”

“I’m sure it’ll be taken care of,” says the greeter, “we’ve hired the best of the best, and surely you wouldn’t want to be troubled during your meal—”

“I’ll do it for free,” says Will, which is clever as hell. He’s even looking at her with those doelike brown eyes, so, kudos, Byers. Claire has never seen anyone look so eager to help in her entire life, except maybe—

No, she’s not going to go down that train of thought.

“Me too,” says Mike. “His stepdad taught me the same tricks.”

The greeter considers this a moment, then says, “Let me get my manager.”

Long story short: Will and Mike get their look, the manager shepherding them towards the power lines to humor these strange customers. Claire, however, sneaks into the storage room in the back with Colleen and Jane while everyone’s in a tizzy about *two customers being inconvenienced* and possible methods of repayment.

The lights are flickering when they step inside, in a pattern that Claire's come to recognize.

"Luke?" she calls, as Jane sits in the middle of the floor, tuning a radio until all Claire can hear from it is static. "Can you and Danny hear me?"

The lights flicker once, twice. Claire lets her breath go—she hadn't even realized she was holding it. She looks at Jane, who's tying her blindfold over her eyes.

"Danny?" says Colleen. "Say something. Anything. *Please.*"

It takes a moment, but Danny's voice cuts through the static at last: "*—that you? Colleen? Claire?*"

"It's us!" says Colleen. "It's us, we're here. Tell us how to get there so we can get you *out*—"

"*Yeah, no, I wouldn't recommend that,*" Luke cuts in. "*There are—There are monsters here, spiders bigger than dining tables, petal-mouthed dog-like things—*"

"*Also the vines,*" says Danny, and Claire frowns. He sounds hoarser than usual, and much less energetic as well.

"*Yes, the vines that are trying to drag us off to get eaten too,*" says Luke.

"What," says Colleen. "Okay, we need to get there even more now. Jane—"

Jane holds up one finger, in a gesture for silence.

"Guys, is there a gateway here?" says Claire. "Or some kind of—of method of creating a gateway?"

"*The Iron Fist,*" says Danny.

"No," says Luke, sounding more than a little scared for Danny. "*You tried that already. You haven't even recharged from the last time.*"

"We have a psychic here with an open connection to the plane you're

on,” says Colleen, suddenly, “maybe—if you use the Fist here, it just might work?”

“Can’t hurt to try,” says Danny, optimistic. *“And—yeah, Luke, I know, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. Let me take it, and if it doesn’t work, we know there’s a safe zone to fall back to.”*

“Around Midland Circle,” says Luke, not as optimistically, and Claire’s gut churns again at the name.

But she looks at Colleen, and sees the way she’s watching the wall, as if hoping to god she’ll see Danny, somehow. She thinks of Luke, of the cold space in her bed where his warmth used to be, of cold cups of coffee, and makes her decision.

“Okay, Danny,” she says, “light it up.”

She could swear she hears Danny’s yell over the walkie-talkie. Then she doesn’t have to hear him, because the wall starts to crack, revealing a translucent red membrane, and Luke and Danny behind it.

“Luke!” says Claire, nearly throwing herself at the gateway. “Jesus Christ, are you guys okay? You look like hell!”

“Claire,” says Luke, and even through this material she can see him smile. *“Claire.* I’m okay, but Danny’s a little—he needs medical attention. Badly.”

Colleen races up to the gateway herself, and says, “Oh my god, *Danny* —”

“I’m okay,” says Danny, weakly, the glow from his hand beginning to fade as he places it on the membrane. He seems almost to slump closer, but even in his exhausted eyes, Claire can see how much he’s missed Colleen. “I’m okay. Oh, god, Colleen, I missed you so much.”

Colleen smiles, a sad and giddily relieved smile. “I missed you too,” she says, before the smile fades into a look of steely resolve. “I need you guys to stand back. I’m going to get you out.”

“That’s not the best idea—” starts Luke.

Claire steps back as Colleen draws her sword, and stabs it into the translucent membrane.

Tries to, anyway.

Nothing *happens*, and Claire feels her heart sink.

It sinks even more when Luke whips around and says, “Oh, no. It’s back.”

“What’s *back*?” says Danny, weakly, and Claire’s helpless to do anything but watch as he turns to look too. “Oh, no. Oh, god, *no*.”

“Get out of here!” shouts Luke.

“I’m not leaving without either of you!” says Colleen, but it’s no use—the wall is closing back over the screen. “No, no, *no*—”

“Leave it, *leave it*,” says Claire, having to pull Colleen back. “Colleen, come on—”

Something starts to strain against the wall. It starts to crack once more, and Claire’s breath hitches in her throat, the terror seizing her lungs for one awful, terrible moment.

Then she hears a sudden pained shriek from the monster in the walls, and cranes her neck to see Jane, standing up, blood dripping from her nose and her hand outstretched, like she’s keeping the thing from invading their world through the power of her mind alone. The monster’s shape disappears, and the lights flicker once, twice, three times again.

“*Claire?*” says Luke, over the radio. It’s so hard to make his voice out over the static. “*Claire, I swear, we’ll get out of here. I—*”

The static finally takes over for good, and the lights above them finally stop flickering.

Claire lets go of Colleen, who steps slowly forward and presses her hand to the wall. “We almost made it,” she whispers, heartbroken.

Claire looks at Jane. She’s swaying precariously, and Claire has to

rush to her side to keep her from toppling over. “You all right?” she asks Jane.

“I’m sorry,” says Jane, as Colleen rushes to her side as well, sheathing her sword before holding Jane up by her other side. “I’m so sorry—I couldn’t open a doorway, not without drawing the monsters’ attention, I’m so *sorry*—”

“You did what you could,” says Claire. “You went way beyond, okay, you need to rest. Nurse’s orders.”

“Thank you,” says Colleen. “*Thank you*, you did everything you could.” She shoots Claire a look over Jane’s head: *let’s get her out of here*.

So they do.

33. but my tracks are better

Summary for the Chapter:

“Why do all this shit for an old babysitter? I barely remember any of mine.”

*“She’s got a point,” Malcolm pipes up from the back.
“This is all pretty above and beyond for a babysitter.”*

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from BANKS' "Beggin' For Thread".

duty of the party.

“Okay,” says Malcolm, leaning a little on Max’s shoulder, “turn left here.”

Max turns left.

“So,” says Jones, breaking the relative silence that they’ve been in since they got back in the car, “that’s your stepbrother.”

“Yep,” says Max, with a sigh. She’s not surprised he ended up like this: a drug dealer in a rickety apartment, on the outskirts of Hell’s Kitchen, still stewing in his own self-importance even after all these years. She barely even hates him, anymore.

That’s a lie, she still does. The very mention of his name had been enough to set her to gritting her teeth, when they’d first been told of his involvement.

“He’s a piece of shit,” says Jones. “A mullet-wearing piece of shit, on top of that.”

“I’ve known that for years,” says Max. “If you ask me, he’s only gotten worse.” After all, he’s graduated to kidnapping now. Her fingers tighten on the steering wheel—she still remembers the bruises on Steve’s face, days after the beating Billy gave him, the mottled yellow and purple colors and the swollen eye.

"Much worse," says Malcolm. "Hey, I gotta ask: did he ever find out about those—things?"

"The Upside Down?" says Max.

"Yeah, that," says Malcolm.

"Never," says Max. "We made sure of that. No one needed to know about—about anything involving the Upside Down, outside of the Party, Mrs. Byers, Hopper, Steve, Jonathan and Nancy." She sighs as she makes another right turn, pulls up near Jones' apartment—they're going to have to clean the place up, Malcolm had insisted on that much. Clients would be expecting the place to look less like a crime scene than before.

Unfortunately, there's still some detectives there, and Jones groans when she sees them. "Jesus fucking Christ," she mutters. "Let's head to Nelson's instead."

"You just want a crack at Dustin's beer," says Max, pulling away from the curb. "I know a better place with better beer."

"The Wonder Trio's?" says Jones.

"Yeah, Steve's pretty discerning in his tastes," says Max. Queens isn't so far from Hell's Kitchen, she's found, not when she's in her Mustang, but after a few more corners she finds her car stuck in the midst of a traffic jam. She scowls at the cars before them.

"Welcome to New York," says Malcolm, with a sympathetic pat to her shoulder.

"Should've walked instead," says Jones, less sympathetic. "And no, not the Wonder Trio's—Trish is nearer, and I'm not going through this hell again."

"I have a Mustang, and you think I'm going to *walk*?" says Max, incredulous.

"At this time?" Jones shoots back. "Hell, yes."

"Then start walking!" Max huffs. "If you're so hell-bent on that, I can

just give you the address and you can go on your way!"

Jones' jaw sets, mulish, and she crosses her arms and settles deeper into her seat. "Maybe," she says, "I'm a little bit curious."

"If it's about the Mustang, I got it after I shot a chase scene in Dubai," says Max.

"You have got to tell me more about that," says Malcolm, a little starry-eyed.

"It's not about the Mustang," says Jones. "It's about Harrington. You didn't go into detail much, but he's up to his ears in this in a way your stepbrother isn't, is he?"

"Yeah," says Max.

"Lot of trouble, though," says Jones, "for an old babysitter, even if he's in the same shit you are." She rests her head against the headrest. "Unless you hang out with everyone who's been through the same shit you have."

"And you don't?" Max asks.

"Let's just say," says Jones, "that it's not something I like talking about."

Fair enough. Max shrugs, and says, "Tell me yours, I'll tell you mine?"

"I already have all of your dirty laundry," says Jones, evenly. "It's spilled all over my kitchen, in fact."

Malcolm looks briefly away from them, and breathes tiredly out. "Who'd send Trish a baby monster?" he says. "Because I can't think of anyone who could want to do that. It's time-consuming, for one thing, and it's not exactly the fastest way of killing someone."

"That's what I want to know," says Jones. "My money's on deranged fan."

"But first they'd have to know about the Upside Down," says Max,

“and they’d have to know that they were sending a baby demogorgon.” She sighs—they’re getting off-topic here, and she can see Jones is itching to punch the bastard who thought it would be funny to send her adoptive sister a murderous pet. She’s seen how hard the woman can punch. She doesn’t doubt it would hurt like hell.

“But enough about that,” she says, “we can talk about that when we get there—you wanted to know about Steve?”

“Yes,” says Jones, after a moment passes. “Why do all this shit for an old babysitter? I barely remember any of mine.”

“She’s got a point,” Malcolm pipes up from the back. “This is all pretty above and beyond for a babysitter.”

Max breathes out.

She says, “He went up against monsters from the Upside Down and Billy to keep us all safe. A lot of times.” She drums her fingers on the steering wheel, impatient, glaring up at the stoplight. It’s got to turn green at some point. Right? “The first time I met him, he put himself between me and a demodog. Then he lied to Billy’s face about where I was and got himself beaten up trying to keep me, Lucas, Dustin and Mike safe.” She sighs. “So I guess you could say this is us trying to pay him back for all of that.”

“Sounds like a stand-up guy,” says Malcolm, sincerely.

“I told you mine,” says Max, “now: how’d you get your powers?”

“I told you,” says Jones, as cagey as ever, and Max meets Malcolm’s sympathetic wince in the rear view mirror, “car accident.”

Max won’t lie, it rankles a lot. Here’s Jones, who now knows almost everything about Max that she’s tried to keep secret for years, and Max still can’t get anything out of her. Not even a straight answer.

“Plenty of people get into car accidents all the time,” she says. “They don’t get superpowers out of the deal.”

Jones very rarely truly smiles. She does give sardonic smiles often, though, the mirthless kind with edges so sharp it’s a wonder she

hasn't cut herself on them yet. She gives Max one now.

"Yeah, well," says Jones, sarcastic. "Maybe I'm just the lucky one who did."

--

trish talk.

"—and while I am thankful for some of the fan mail I've received, I'd like to point out that the mailroom doesn't really like it when they have to handle live specimens," says Trish, over the air as Karen absently turns up the volume on her radio. *"Nevertheless, I'd love to talk to you about some of the strangest things you might have received in the mail. Who knows, maybe we can give our resident mail people a little laugh."*

That's weird, usually Trish prefers more hard-hitting topics than this. Karen supposes it's probably pressure from her producers, to at least talk about something fluffy for a few minutes before switching back to her usual topics. TrishTalk, after all, is supposed to be a lifestyle show, though Trish has been lobbying to turn it into something more serious for a while.

Lobbying, ha. Trish is already turning it into something serious even without approval from her producers. Karen admires that about her.

"I didn't know you were such a big fan of Patsy Walker," says Marci. They're sitting at a café across from the hospital, waiting on Foggy to text them and say they can come in—no doubt the hospital's limiting the number of people this man who very nearly got strangled in his own cell can see.

"Patsy—oh, right," says Karen. Sometimes she forgets Trish used to be a child star. "No, I never actually saw the show, growing up."

"Really?" says Marci, an eyebrow quirking upward in shock. "Then how exactly did the two of you meet? I'm sure she's still doing convention circuits, promoting her little show everywhere she can. Was it there?"

We met at a police precinct while under police protection from an ancient criminal organization hell-bent on destroying New York for their own

selfish purposes. “We just worked the same story and crossed paths,” Karen says, and it isn’t even a lie. “We flipped a coin over who got to break it first.”

“What’s even there to work?” says Marci, tapping perfectly manicured fingernails against the table.

“Oh,” says Karen, thinking of the bulletin board in the precinct with the crime scene photos pinned up, the sheer terror of being trapped in a room with all the other hostages, the aftermath of Midland Circle, “you’d be surprised.”

34. call your number, the line ain't free

Summary for the Chapter:

"I'd like to point out," says Claire, "for the record, a plan that requires having to sneak in somehow past heavily-armed guards is a plan that I have some reservations about."

"But you're still going," says Colleen.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from the Scorpions' "Always Somewhere".

tough meat.

"Hey, Troy," says Foggy, falsely cheerful when Troy's eyes slowly open, "hope you don't mind me and Lucas coming to visit you. We just want to ask you a few questions."

"*Shit*," hisses Troy, trying to get up out of the bed.

Lucas jumps out of his chair, pushes Troy down and says, irritated, "Don't *move* so much, you're supposed to be resting."

"What the *hell*—" Troy starts. "Don't touch me!"

"I'm a qualified nurse, asshole," Lucas shoots back, and Foggy doesn't mention that he doesn't actually work in New York, "I'm keeping you safe. Trust me, there's nothing more I'd love to do than to watch you fall off this bed."

"It'd be funny, though," Foggy says, and smiles cheekily when Lucas shoots him a Look as he settles back down into his chair, apparently certain that Troy won't be trying to escape them any time soon. "What? You said it yourself."

Troy's eyes grow wide as saucers, which is—weird, to say the least. He scrambles back as if Foggy's mere proximity might actually burn him. It's a little bit insulting, but Foggy's had worse problems this

week, so instead he just leans forward a little, clasping his hands together.

“I just need to ask,” says Foggy, as calmly as he can, “did you have anything—*anything*—to do with Steve, Jonathan and Nancy just disappearing out of nowhere?”

Troy stares at him, wide-eyed. Then he gulps, but says, with a shade of the former bravado that Foggy had known out of him when they were first in middle school, “And if I do? There’s nothing either of you can do about it. Toothless here doesn’t even have a license anymore.” He lifts his chin up and has the audacity to smirk smugly at Foggy.

Foggy sucks in a breath, and breathes out through his nose. “Maybe,” he says, evenly, “but I’ve still got a friend or two.” He leans forward, and says, “I’m not going to try to appeal to your better nature. I’ve known you for long enough that I kinda doubt you’d listen if I did. But I am going to tell you that an anonymous tip in the right ear can mean the difference between a good lawyer and a plea deal, or the rest of your natural life in a cold cell in the worst prison in New York. And, judging by the look on your face, you’ve got a pretty good idea what prison life is like already.”

“You can’t threaten me,” Troy snarls back, but Foggy’s a lawyer. He knows what uncertainty sounds like, knows what the beginnings of doubt look like on someone’s face—eyes flickering here, a twitch of the lip of there, a tremor in the hands. “You’re not even a *lawyer* anymore.”

“First of all,” says Foggy, deceptively light, “my license just got suspended. Technically speaking, I’m still a lawyer. I just don’t get to practice right now, but it does mean people are willing to hear me out when I need them to.” Like Marci, who’s—okay, fine, Marci may be the only person from HCB Foggy knows right now who’s willing to hear him out. He’s got the feeling the rest of them won’t be too pleased if he comes calling around. “Second of all? I’m not threatening you, Troy. I’m just pointing out that I can either ease things along for you, make the legal system work in your favor, or I can just sit back and leave you alone. You think Fisk is going to come help you?”

Troy flinches back. There's more confirmation that Foggy needs: Fisk is involved, somehow, in Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve's disappearances. So's Troy.

"Considering he sent a guy to kill you," Lucas breaks in, "I'm pretty sure he won't."

Troy pales, and Foggy says, "It's your choice, *buddy*. You can either tell us, and Brett, everything you know about Fisk, Trainer, and what happened to Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve, or you can keep your trap shut. Just know that, legally speaking, I don't have to lift a finger to help you, if you're not gonna help me." A ghost of his old smile touches his lips, then, sardonic. "I've got a bleeding heart, thanks to—a friend of mine, but even that's got its limits. My advice, Troy? Don't test them."

Troy stares at him, mouth working. Foggy risks a glance over at Lucas, who's managed to somehow restrain himself from grinning at him, impressed.

Maybe a year ago Foggy would've felt just as impressed with himself. Six months ago he would've smiled faintly back at Lucas. Now he just feels—*exhausted*, somehow, the pride a distant thing in the back of his mind. It's this whole fucking week, he thinks.

But he feels a little better when Troy says, with still-wide eyes, "Okay. *Okay*. I want the plea deal, Jesus *Christ*, when did you grow some balls?"

"Bleeding heart," Foggy reminds him, "limits." He stands up, and says to Lucas, "I'll go get Brett, and then let me see if I can get a lawyer in here."

Man, he's going to have to upgrade Marci's dinner.

--

how to break into a lab.

They spend the entire subway ride back to Queens in silence. Jane spends it with her stomach threatening to send up everything she's eaten today through her throat, because god, she's been using her

abilities a lot more and a lot harder than usual, lately.

She leans against Mike's steady warmth, and catches Colleen's hand beside hers. She squeezes it tight in reassurance, once she's sure Colleen's not going to pull away.

Colleen, beside her, relaxes just a fraction, the tension bleeding out of her shoulders.

They walk back to the Wheeler-Byers-Harrington apartment in silence. Jane glances up, once or twice, but she doesn't catch sight of a black-clad figure waiting for Will, and Will heads back up with them.

The moment Jane spies the couch, she flops down onto it with a gusty sigh. Mike and Will sit down on either side of her, bracketing her.

Colleen takes the armchair. Claire stands for a moment, before she says, "I'm going to make something. Is there anything here?"

"Nancy left some peanut butter and jam," says Mike. "Also, Eggos."

"There's some falafel in the fridge," Will volunteers. "Some latkes too."

"Already sounds a lot better than Foggy's fridge," says Claire, taking off for the kitchen.

Jane watches her go, then breathes out again. With the way her luck's been going lately, she's fairly certain she'll have to fight another demogorgon before dinner, and considering how long it's been since she last seriously used her powers in this manner—

Colleen says, quietly, "Is there—Could you find any other gates in the city?"

"Listen," Mike starts, but Jane reaches her hand up to his shoulder and squeezes once, twice.

"No," she says to Colleen, and the moment the woman deflates, she feels as terrible as if she'd kicked her puppy in front of her. "I'm

sorry, but—I can't, right now, even if I wanted to, and I *want* to. They're unpredictable and unstable, and even if I could find one, there's a chance it'd be gone the second we got there. Or full of monsters."

Colleen scrubs her hands over her face. "There's no way we can break through to the other side from here," she says, despairing.

"There's one way," says Will, catching Jane's attention. "But—it's risky, and we'll either get arrested or end up disappearing the same way Jonathan, Nancy and Steve did." He fidgets with his sleeve, nervous.

Jane bumps his side. "I think by now we're all used to risk," she says.

Will sighs, and says, "We find the gate. *The* gate, the one Trainer's probably opened. Then we use it to get Cage and Rand out."

"You're right, that is risky," says Jane.

Mike shakes his head. "No, no way," he says. "There's only, what, two locations likely to have the gate, and both have so many guards that we'd probably be *dead* before we've even opened our mouths. And that's if we're lucky."

"I'm hearing the sound of pessimism," says Claire, coming back with a plate full of sandwiches and a sandwich in her own hand. Jane gratefully snatches up the PB&J sandwich, and bites absently down. Yep, Jonathan made this one—there's just a little too much jam.

The thought of Jonathan, still missing, is like a knife through Jane's heart.

"You hear right," Mike says, "because we can't break into either the company headquarters or the company lab!"

"Research development hub," says Will, sarcastic.

"That's exactly the same thing," huffs Mike.

"Why are we breaking into a lab?" says Claire. "Or not breaking into a lab."

“Because there’s a good chance it has the gate,” says Jane, “and if we can somehow pass through the gate, then maybe we can get Cage and Rand back.” She sighs, pressing fingers to her temples, and says, “But Mike isn’t wrong. There’s a lot in the way, and we don’t know what it’s like inside. There’s no guarantee it’s anything like Hawkins Lab.”

Claire’s quiet for a long moment, before she says, “Would any of them recognize your faces?”

“Yeah, probably,” says Mike. “We, uh. We were kind of the front lines whenever the Upside Down tried to push into Hawkins.”

Claire makes a terrible noise, and even Colleen looks up at them, sympathy and understanding in her eyes.

“Jesus, no wonder Foggy never talked about this,” Claire mutters.

“But they wouldn’t recognize *us*,” says Colleen. “We can get in there, put together some kind of—layout, or something. If there’s a map we can even take a picture.”

“That’s not a bad plan,” says Jane, sitting up.

“You could even ask for a guided tour,” says Will, and Jane can’t help but grin at the way his face lights up, at the thought of finally getting some answers.

“I’d like to point out,” says Claire, “for the record, a plan that requires having to sneak in somehow past heavily-armed guards is a plan that I have some reservations about.”

“But you’re still going,” says Colleen.

Claire sighs. “Yes,” she says. “God help me, I’m still going. Someone’s got to stitch you up when things inevitably go to shit.”

“It’s not gonna be that bad,” says Colleen, optimistically.

“China,” says Claire, getting a wince out of Colleen.

Mike says, “I don’t think you need to do much sneaking in at all.” He stands up, starts rummaging through Nancy’s files and some of her

less-than-legal things. He comes up with a couple of IDs from Trainer's company. "Nancy wasn't able to use these before she disappeared," he explains. "We'd just need to swap the pictures out, and you guys will do fine."

"I know how to take pictures," Will volunteers.

"I've got some passable Photoshop skill," says Colleen.

Claire sighs once more. Jane's never met someone so given to sighing deeply her whole life, and she's known quite a few. Especially Hopper.

"Fine," she says. "Okay. This isn't even the most illegal plan I've ever been a part of." She pauses, and winces, as if she never thought she would say that out loud. Jane can sympathize.

"I think that's Midland Circle, from what you've said," she says.

"You'd be surprised," says Claire, a little darkly.

35. here lies the great unknown

Summary for the Chapter:

He's pretty sure they're in range of at least two security cameras right now, which means he has to be careful in what he says. You never know who's watching. "If she disappeared investigating this, it means you need to be careful," he says.

"I could be more careful if I knew what I was walking into," says Karen, tersely, eyes flashing with anger. "Foggy, I have to know. I can't help if I don't know what the hell is going on here."

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Elvis Costello's "The Great Unknown".

sorry for the weeks-long delay everyone! Real Life Happened.

the basket.

Some time back, Trish gave Jessica a key to her apartment.

Mostly, what it means is that Jessica doesn't have to jump up to Trish's apartment anymore, which is good, because that's honestly a hassle. Especially when she's drunk and her hand-eye coordination is shot straight to shit.

Instead of that old method, she simply flashes her ID to the doorman, a formality since the guy already knows who she is, jerks her thumb to Malcolm and Max, and coolly says, "They're with me."

Malcolm gives the man a cheery wave.

The elevator ride up to Trish's place is uneventful, Max absently drumming her fingers against her leather jacket. Jessica's hand sneaks into her pocket, a thumb brushing over the key's ridges. Kilgrave is dead and gone, and Trish's apartment is as safe as a

fortress, but Jessica finds herself looking over her shoulder nonetheless when she steps out of the elevator.

For what, she's not sure. She just feels relieved that no one else is here, besides herself and her two tagalongs.

She opens the door to Trish's apartment. It opens with enough noise to alert anyone inside, and Jessica steps in and gestures grandly to her best friend's apartment. "Don't make yourselves at home," she says, "we're only here to see what Malcolm's baby monster Nougat came in."

Malcolm steps inside, whistles lowly, like he's surprised by how lived-in Trish's place looks. And it does, Jessica has to admit that—it's clean, but the sort of clean that means someone loves this place. There's a few pictures now, of Jessica and Trish looking at the camera, and a recent one of Trish, Karen Page and missing Nancy Wheeler, at some kind of radio awards show.

Max drifts over to that last picture, as Jessica looks in the kitchen, where Trish had said she'd put the basket and the note it came with out for her to look at. "I know this girl in the middle," she says, pointing to Page. "Dustin sent over some pictures."

"Miss Page?" says Malcolm. "She's a good person—damn good reporter, too."

"I know," says Max.

Jessica looks away, then, to the unassuming basket sitting in the middle of the table. It's definitely making her think of Harry Potter, from the soft pillow to the basket itself. She half-wonders if this really is just some random crazy fan who happened to run across a slug and who thought it would make for a good impression on his radio crush.

But no, that doesn't quite fit. There's too many coincidences here—the fact that Nougat was of the same species and origin as those *things* in the alley, for one thing. This had been deliberate.

She grits her teeth.

The note's still resting on the pillow. She opens it up, eyes scanning over the note. *For the incomparable Patricia Walker: I hope that you love and enjoy him the rest of your days. Yours truly, an Admirer.*

It's *the rest of your days* that cinches it. The bastard knew what he was sending, had *planned* on it killing Trish. And messily, too.

The bloodstains are still in her apartment, and the monsters' shrill shrieks are still ringing in her head.

She takes a picture of the note, puts it back down in the basket. Then she slams her fist down onto the table, and cracks the surface—something she regrets doing a moment later, when Malcolm races in with wide eyes, saying, “Holy shit—you okay, Jess?”

Max pokes her head in, and says, “Oh, Jesus. You're not invincible, are you?”

“I'm fine,” says Jessica, reflexively, opening and closing her fingers. “Shit.” She's going to rip this bastard's intestines out through his asshole, probably.

“You're *bleeding*,” says Malcolm, tapping her elbow. “Come on, Trish has a first-aid kit in her bathroom.”

“I can tape up my knuckles my own damn self,” Jessica mutters, but Malcolm pulls her along anyway. She keeps an eye on Max, who picks up the note and frowns down at the handwriting, but there's no recognition dawning there. Damn. “Quit fussing.”

“You're paying me now,” Malcolm says. “This is partly in my own interests, I need that steady income.”

“Knew it,” Jessica mutters, as Malcolm gently tugs her into the bathroom and looks her knuckles over. She looks around the bathroom, watching the walls.

“What are you looking for?” says Malcolm.

“Cracks,” says Jessica.

“In Trish's bathroom?” says Malcolm, taping up her fist.

“You know how that thing almost came through my bedroom wall?” says Jessica.

“Yeah, and you punched it back into its dimension,” says Malcolm, a hint of admiration in his tone. Jessica ducks her head, caught off her guard by that hint alone. Jesus. She wrecks her wall and suddenly she’s the fucking h-word again. Funny how that shit works out.

She sighs. “I got lucky, that’s all,” she says. “And I wrecked my bedroom wall along with it, so. I’m just wondering if I’ll have to wreck Trish’s bathroom wall.”

“Nah,” says Malcolm, optimistic. But she catches him glancing around the walls anyway once they’ve finished, biting his lip.

“You guys done?” says Max when they come out. She’s folded the note up, and it’s sticking out of the front pocket of her jacket now. “You know who might have written this?”

“Not right now, no,” says Jessica. “You?”

“Not a clue,” says Max. “We can take my stepbrother off the list, at least—he doesn’t know shit about the Upside Down.” She crosses her arms, and says, “All right, Miss Jones. Where to next?”

“Downstairs,” says Jessica. “I need to see the security camera feeds.”

“You need a distraction?” says Max.

“I’m going to be the distraction,” says Jessica. “You and Malcolm can pull the feed.”

Malcolm fishes a flash drive out of his pocket, says, “I’ve still got some storage left on this, we can use it.”

Max smiles a little, almost nostalgic for something. She turns to her side, as if to say something to someone, then pauses and shakes her head. “Come on, then,” she says. “Let’s get out of here.”

--

deeper shit than they can handle.

Marci and Brett head inside as Lucas and Foggy step out. Marci raises an eyebrow at Lucas, but she doesn't make any comments that could be taken the wrong way, so Foggy counts that as a win.

And he really needs a few wins, right now.

"Doing okay?" says Lucas, pressing buttons on the vending machine as Foggy slumps into a chair. "That was pretty badass, back there. You scared *Troy*."

Dustin Henderson, twelve years old, would have been proud of such a feat. Foggy just feels tired, and he presses the heel of his palm to his eye. "I didn't scare him," he says, "I just—played on his desperation and played down how much shit I'm in. Marci'll scare him a lot more, she can actually back up her threats."

"If that's not you being scary, I don't want to see what you're like when you're *trying* to be," says Lucas, taking out a warm paper cup full of shitty coffee and handing it off to Foggy. "So. Marci."

"We're broken up," says Foggy, shortly, taking a tentative sip of his coffee.

"Oh, good," says Lucas. "Don't look at me like *that*."

"She's still my friend," says Foggy, sternly.

"Yeah, but she broke your heart way too many times for me to be *happy* about her," says Lucas, punching in for another cup of coffee. "Do you just enjoy getting your heart broken or something?"

"I think this time I'm the one who did the heart-breaking, not her," says Foggy. "So technically she and I are even." He takes another sip of his coffee, and it tastes bitter on his tongue, like ashes. "Besides, she's got a soul. It's just—buried very, very deep."

"I *guess*," says Lucas, just as his phone rings. He pulls it out, then sighs. "It's Erica," he says.

"Go talk to her," says Foggy, flapping a hand. "I'll just drink my coffee and stare at the walls."

“She’s just gonna be *annoying*,” huffs Lucas.

“And you’re gonna swear at her, and the nurses will want to throw you out, and I’m going to tell them I don’t know who you are,” says Foggy, “so go on, scat. Swear at your sister *outside*, I can wait.”

Lucas punches his shoulder in answer, a gentle smack of his fist against Foggy’s shoulder. “Jerk,” he fondly says, but he goes.

Foggy watches him leave, then sighs and takes another sip of his coffee, slumping into his seat even more.

“Is this seat taken?”

Foggy straightens up, and blinks up at Karen. “Not at all,” he says, and Karen smiles gratefully at him, sits down next to him. “Hi, Karen.”

“Hi, Foggy,” Karen says. “Who was your friend?”

“That’s Lucas Sinclair,” says Foggy. “From Hawkins. He’s looking for Jonathan, Nancy and Steve, too—did you get anything off of Mike’s e-mail?”

“Not a lot,” says Karen, looking away and clasping her hands on top of her knees. “I did get the notes, but something about them is just off, somehow. Like Nancy was sloppier than usual.”

Foggy swallows. “Oh?” he says.

Karen nods, and says, “They don’t add up. There’s parts that are missing, connections that don’t make as much sense without them. Whatever’s going on, Foggy, I think—I think your friends might be in some deeper shit than they can handle. I think *Nancy* might be in more trouble than I first thought.”

He wants to tell her. He wants to take her aside and tell her the truth, all of it, the Upside Down and Hawkins Lab and MK-ULTRA, the years he spent on the front lines of a battle for his town. He wants so much to let her in, but—

He can’t tell her everything, can he. The Upside Down is too fantastic

to believe, even now, and even if Karen did believe him, she couldn't do anything about the knowledge. Not without putting herself at risk of surveillance, or worse.

He sighs, and looks up at her. "Whatever's going on, I've got a feeling my friends can handle it," he says. "And Nancy can handle trouble, too. She's a reporter like you are, you've probably run into more trouble than you thought you'd get into yourself, once or twice."

"But if she disappeared investigating this," says Karen, "doesn't that follow that I have to know what I'm getting myself into?"

Foggy lets out a breath, glancing around. The hospital has a lot of security cameras, thanks to the policies implemented in the wake of the Punisher's rampage while looking for Grotto. He's pretty sure they're in range of at least two right now, which means he has to be careful in what he says. You never know who's watching. "If she disappeared investigating this, it means you need to be careful," he says.

"I could be more careful if I knew what I was walking into," says Karen, tersely, eyes flashing with anger. "Foggy, I *have* to know. I can't help if I don't know what the hell is going on here."

Foggy looks around, eyes catching on the security cameras, then huffs out a breath. He stands up and says, "We should talk outside. I can't—There's stuff I really *can't* talk about, what with the NDAs I signed, but I can give you the gist of things."

"NDAs?" says Karen, standing up with him. "What the hell?"

"Yeah, *plural*," says Foggy, a hand settling on her elbow out of habit. Then he blinks, and takes his hand off, shoves it into his pocket—Karen's not Matt. Damn it, this week's beginning to get to him.

Beginning to, ha. It's already gotten to him. Days like these he wishes
—

He won't think on that, anymore.

Karen's hand settles on the crook of his elbow, and when he glances her way, he sees the steel in her eyes. *I'm not going to stick my head in*

the sand and let it happen to somebody else because I'm scared, her voice echoes in his head, from two years ago. In retrospect, he's hardly surprised she became a reporter, even less that it suits her so well.

But he sees the steel in her eyes, the *fire*, and despite his resolution to not think about Matt for the time being, he can't help it. The two of them, Matt and Karen—they're practically cut from the same cloth.

He's already had to bury Matt. He can't bury Karen, too.

And goddammit, she's got a *point*.

He just—needs to keep the Upside Down out of it, keep Eleven and his own role in this whole mess out of it. Should be easy enough.

He hopes so, anyway.

36. tell me a little white lie

Summary for the Chapter:

“But—you know about Hawkins Lab, right? You know the basics of the case?”

“Yeah, it was all over the news,” says Karen, folding her arms. Even in Vermont the Hawkins Lab scandal had raised some questions, especially among the more eccentrically-inclined of Karen’s parents’ friends, but Karen hadn’t really cared about the news then. She has the bare bones of the case’s details now, and the scraps Nancy’s notes have given her in connection to Trainer, but not much more. “Why?” she asks, suspicious.

Foggy, god damn him, gives her this wounded look, like he’s surprised and hurt she’d be suspicious. She wants to shake him, demand that he stop dancing around the subject and just give it to her straight.

She reins that instinct in. NDAs, he’d said. Plural.

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Huey Lewis and the News' "Tell Me A Little Lie". (the sheer irony of this song.)

rumor has it.

They step into the alley just behind the hospital, and Karen says, “Okay. We’re out. Now can you tell me just what the hell is going on here?”

“Not *exactly*,” says Foggy, looking around like he’s half-expecting someone to drop in on them, and dreading it as well. It’s not a look she’s used to seeing on him, even in the cases where they’d gone up against drug lords and criminals aspiring to fill in Fisk’s position. “But—you know about Hawkins Lab, right? You know the basics of the case?”

“Yeah, it was all over the news,” says Karen, folding her arms. Even in Vermont the Hawkins Lab scandal had raised some questions, especially among the more eccentrically-inclined of Karen’s parents’ friends, but Karen hadn’t really cared about the news then. She has the bare bones of the case’s details now, and the scraps Nancy’s notes have given her in connection to Trainer, but not much more. “Why?” she asks, suspicious.

Foggy, god damn him, gives her this wounded look, like he’s surprised and hurt she’d be suspicious. She wants to shake him, demand that he stop dancing around the subject and just give it to her straight.

She reins that instinct in. NDAs, he’d said. *Plural*. The NDA she’d signed had been comprehensive enough by itself, though it hadn’t counted on Ben’s involvement. Whatever Foggy’s seen in connection with Hawkins Lab, it’s big enough to warrant something more thorough than the one Union Allied’s remnants drew up for her. And he’s already in a lot of legal trouble, with the charges and the subpoena.

Still. Foggy’s keeping secrets from her, *again*, and the fact of it leaves a bitter taste in her mouth, like ashes, like dirt. She’s sick of this. She’s sick of being kept out of the loop. She’s proven herself, hasn’t she? *Hasn’t she?*

“There are rumors,” Foggy starts, “that Hawkins Lab was—experimenting on kids. Taking them from their families, turning them into weapons. And other rumors, too, about experimental toxins that the Lab was screwing around with—there’s confirmation of at least one toxin that killed Barb Holland, but there are theories flying around to this day that there could be more.”

For a moment Karen wants to smack him, for giving her rumors when he promised her the truth. Then she remembers her own NDA—and Ben, who’d helped her go around it. And there’s *always* ways to go around them, no matter how thoroughly they might seem at first.

Rumors aren’t always *lies*. Not completely.

“Do these rumors have anything to do with Trainer?” she says,

playing along.

“Some of them, yeah,” says Foggy. “There’s a lot of talk about Trainer being connected to the guy who used to run Hawkins Lab—Martin Brenner. He used to run this program called MK-ULTRA, too, but that one folded under the weight of all the lawsuits before he went on to Hawkins Lab.”

“Any rumors about MK-ULTRA?” says Karen.

“There’s a lot of people who think they actually managed to succeed in something,” says Foggy. “I’ve heard rumors here and there about them churning out kids with psychic powers, turning them into weapons for one thing or another. Like Captain America, only—from birth, and with psychic powers, and with a lot less scruples on the scientists’ part.”

Karen’s heart lurches. “And—according to these rumors,” she says, “Trainer and Brenner would be related to each other?”

“Yeah, rumor has it they are,” Foggy says, looking a little relieved. “Uncle and niece, from what I hear. I know—I’ve heard she might want to finish what he started, with MK-ULTRA and Hawkins Lab.”

“And what would happen, hypothetically, in a scenario where these rumors are true,” says Karen, gears turning in her head, “if someone were to find a way to intervene and to stop her?”

“Hypothetically,” says Foggy, stressing the word less for her benefit and more for the benefit of anyone listening, “*hypothetically*, she’d find a way to get them out of the way. You know how mad scientist types work, and she seems like exactly that kind of person, from everything I’ve heard about her.”

“So she might, according to rumor, be either experimenting on children,” says Karen, connecting the dots in her head and coming up with a sickening picture, “or creating possibly-lethal experimental toxins for—for what? The *hell* of it?”

“Not the hell of it,” says Foggy. “For science. Maybe she wants to prove something—in this scenario, her uncle’s experiments all failed

because of one reason or another, right? One went down because of lawsuits, the other burned when someone leaked a tape to the press.” He tucks his hands into his pockets, eyes darting around the alley as if he thinks someone might be watching. “She might think she could do it better. She might think she could actually see it all through.”

“So what does Fisk have to do with her?” says Karen, after a moment’s horror. “In this hypothetical scenario. A mad scientist and a crime lord seem like an odd duo, don’t you think?”

“Not if the crime lord’s desperate to get his power back,” says Foggy. “And not if the mad scientist wants help in getting subjects she can’t get as easily, and securing funding and materials in not-so-legal ways.”

“Like kidnapping,” says Karen, all the pieces sliding into place.

“Hypothetically speaking,” says Foggy.

“*Jesus*,” says Karen, scrubbing a hand over her mouth. “Fisk wants his power and position back, Trainer wants to—advance the march of scientific progress? Via unethical experiments in the same vein as in Hawkins Lab, and she’s rich enough to silence anyone who might come after her with enough money.”

“And if they can’t be bribed,” says Foggy, grimly, and she knows then and there, for *certain*, that this is real, that none of it is as hypothetical as they’re pretending it is, “that’s what Fisk is there to help her out with.”

“And he gets access to whatever she’s cooking up that could help him gain a foothold in Hell’s Kitchen once more,” says Karen, following his line of thought. “And Nancy’s right in the middle of it.”

“Hypothetically,” says Foggy.

“Right, this is Fisk,” says Karen, a little bitter. Every day that passes by means less and less chance that they’ll find Nancy and her husbands alive, and even just the thought is a rusty knife in Karen’s gut. She’s had to bury too many people already. She’s not sure she can take another one. “But in this hypothetical scenario, Trainer’s

connected to Hawkins Lab.”

“The one that shut down ‘cause of Nancy, yeah,” says Foggy.

“Who’s to say,” says Karen, a horrifying scenario unfolding in her head, “that she’s not keeping them alive for something else?”

Foggy makes a terrible noise, in the back of his throat, his eyes growing wide and horrified. She sees the moment when it dawns on him, what else they could be kept alive for, and the hell of it is—she doesn’t know what. But from the “hypotheticals” that he’s been giving her? She’s got an idea.

“Jesus,” says Foggy, quietly.

“Hypothetically speaking,” says Karen, following that line of thought through to the logical and grim conclusion, “where would these—psychic kids be kept?”

“A lab,” says Foggy, and Karen remembers: the *research development hub* that Nancy had written about, in her notes. “Hypothetically.”

They’re not in the realm of rumors and hypotheticals anymore, that much is true just by looking at Foggy’s furtive eyes, the way he looks around like he’s scared someone or *something* might be watching them, might know what he’s doing. Karen doubts they ever were, through the whole conversation.

The back door opens, and Marci arches an eyebrow at Foggy, who’d jumped almost a foot in the air at the creak of the door’s rusted hinges. “Hey, Foggy-bear,” she greets in a sing-song voice, and Karen startles as the tension in the air dissipates, “your old friend sang like a *canary*. What’d you do to him before I got here?” She looks between the two of them, and asks, “And what were you two up to here?”

“We were catching up,” says Foggy. It’s not false, but to Karen, it carries the ring of a lie.

Marci raises a plucked brow. “Uh-huh,” she says.

“And Troy’s not my friend,” Foggy adds, somewhat thoughtfully. “He’s like, the asshole who pulled a knife on me once when we were

kids.”

“I’m sorry, *what*,” says Marci, her eyebrows going up into her hair, giving her an almost comically wide-eyed look.

“He did *what*,” says Karen, more than a little alarmed. What kind of kid pulls a *knife* on someone?

“I like to think he’s probably changed a teeny bit from his knife-pulling, pants-peeing ways back in middle school,” says Foggy, but he doesn’t *sound* convinced, and—*middle school*, Jesus Christ. Was Hawkins stuck in the eighties or something? Who lets their kids carry knives into school? Even Karen’s rural, backwards-ass hometown knew better than that.

“You owe me the fanciest goddamn dinner, Nelson,” says Marci, folding her arms and glaring Foggy down. “The *fanciest*.”

Foggy smiles back, tightly. “Yeah, lemme just figure out how to get that with only twenty dollars to my name, Marce,” he says.

“Oh, and,” says Marci, “your other Hawkins buddy? Wants to talk to you.”

--

taste in friends.

“I seriously have doubts about your taste in friends all the way out here,” says Lucas, the second he and Dustin have managed to get each other alone, the two of them standing in a hospital corridor while Brett takes Troy’s statement. He’s—a little shaken, fine, from talking to Marci without Dustin around to serve as a buffer, because the woman’s smart and sharp as a knife. And she *knows* it.

Okay, fine, so maybe he’s got some idea why Dustin likes her so much. Doesn’t mean *Lucas* does, because Marci Stahl’s just—a heartbreaker, a mouth-breather, at least in the limited interactions he’s had with her. He’s surprised she and Dustin have tried this relationship thing, what, two, three times now? Jesus.

Dustin just huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, sometimes I can’t help but

wonder what happened there too,” he says. “I blame you guys. You raised the bar too high, no one else could reach it.”

“Not even perfect Matt Murdock, huh,” says Lucas, with a little huff, and he sees Dustin’s face crumple again and *fuck*. “Jesus—shit, Dustin —”

“It’s fine,” says Dustin, looking far from fine, as he ducks his head and wipes at his eyes. “I—You’re right. You’re right, is the thing. Matt was, is, *was* a good guy, but he just—stuff happened between us, and we were—we were—”

Lucas closes the distance between them, gathers his best friend close into a hug. Dustin stiffens a little, like he’s not so used anymore to getting these, and Lucas wishes he was surprised by that, wishes he could be surprised Dustin’s life is such a mess that he apparently hasn’t gotten hugged in a while when he’d been the touchiest person Lucas ever knew when they were kids.

He’d blame New York, but Nancy, Jonathan and Steve made it all right until this week. Must be Hell’s Kitchen, then. He knew living here was a bad idea, the name alone should’ve been a dead giveaway.

Dustin relaxes, then, and shakes a little in his arms, as if he’s already cried his heart out earlier, or yesterday. Lucas lets him shake, stroking a hand idly over his back, near the nape of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he says, quiet, after a while. “I didn’t—”

“*I’m* sorry,” says Dustin, breaking away and wiping furiously at his eyes, trying for a smile, “I keep breaking down on people. Fuck, I’m ruining your shirt, aren’t I? God, Max would be pissed.”

“She’s done worse than cry on my shirt,” says Lucas. “*I do* still want to know what the hell is up with you, because, seriously, man, I’ve got no idea anymore—how’d you of all people get involved with superheroes?”

“Man, some of it’s not my secret to tell,” says Dustin, regretfully. “But I can give you the gist of it.” He looks around, as if scanning for security cameras, then sighs. “But not here,” he says. “I know a pretty

good place—how do you feel about going to a dive bar in the middle of the day?”

“Why would we go to a *dive bar* in the middle of the day?” says Lucas, crossing his arms.

“Because Josie’s is noisy enough at any time before early morning that we can hold any secret conversation we want and no one’s going to hear us,” says Dustin. “But, uh—you’re paying for our drinks.”

“That’s not fair,” says Lucas, as Dustin’s hand rests on his arm, tugs him along on their way out of the hospital. “Seriously, why am *I* paying for drinks?”

“Because I’m broke and I’m the one telling the story, asshole,” says Dustin. “Now come on. I wanna get to Josie’s before the other sadsack day-drinkers get there and drink all the good alcohol.”

“It’s a dive bar,” says Lucas. “There can’t be *that* much.”

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something's off.

Danny tosses a rock down the hole in Midland Circle.

It—takes a while, to hit the bottom. When it does, though, it echoes oddly enough that Danny startles back, Luke catching him by the arm before he can topple over the edge. He’s glad for Luke—he half-thinks that if it wasn’t for him, Danny’d probably be dead, trying to claw his way back to the real world by force alone.

And that, they’ve figured out at least, they can’t do. They’ve *tried*. Sure, they’ve figured out ways to communicate with Claire and Colleen, but that’s not—it’s not the *same*, as being on the same plane of existence.

They’d almost managed to break through, in that bizarro version of the Areté they’d narrowly escaped from. But Danny’s not about to let a monster through to his world. More monsters, anyway, he’s seen more than enough corpses dragged here to know what his and Luke’s fate is going to be, should they stay here any longer.

But they won't. He won't allow it to happen.

"Yeah, well, that's the both of us," says Luke, when he says this. They're not really *lingering* around the remnants of Midland Circle, only lurking on the outskirts of it, because it keeps giving Luke the heebie-jeebies, and—well. It *should* give Danny the heebie-jeebies too, because there's so much that happened in the real-world version of this literal hellhole that by all rights, Danny should want to stay the hell away from it.

And he does. For the version that he knows in the real world, anyway.

But—

Something's drawing him there, he thinks.

"That's more than enough reason for me to not like it," says Luke, and oh. He'd said that out loud. "Something's *off* about it. You can feel it, right? With your chi thing?"

"Something's off about this whole place," says Danny, crossing his arms. But that requires taking his hand off the wall he's been using as support, and he sways on his feet after a few seconds so he uncrosses his arms, sets his hand back on the wall. "And, yeah, something is off about it, but what if our way home's down there?"

"Why are you so sure there's a way back down in that hole?" says Luke, his brow furrowing.

"Call it a gut feeling," says Danny.

"Or something else," says Luke.

"What, so you're going to just dismiss a possible way home because, what, you don't want to go back down there?" Danny snaps.

Luke sighs. "Yeah, *I'm* not a big fan of going near it, but that doesn't mean I'm dismissing it as an option completely," he says.

"Sure sounds like it," Danny huffs.

Luke raises an eyebrow. "You up and said that something's drawing you here," he says. "Call it a gut feeling, but this place is screwing with you pretty badly. Maybe this is more of that."

"Maybe," Danny reluctantly acknowledges, "but—maybe not. Have we got any other option?"

"That lady you saw," says Luke. "With the curls, and the radio? Jane or El, wasn't that her name? She managed to find us all the way here, twice, and if it weren't for that monster happening on us, I'm sure she could've opened that gate all the way through."

"So we establish contact with her," says Danny. "Okay, that's not a bad plan. How?"

"That," says Luke, with a huff, "is something I'm still trying to figure out."

"...I could meditate," Danny offers. "Try and get in contact with her, or at least get her attention. I mean, I can't guarantee *much*."

Luke lets out a long sigh, the kind he gives when he's not really sure what the heck Danny's talking about. It's fine, Danny's long gotten used to his friends outside of Colleen not knowing what the hell he's talking about, and at least most of them besides Jessica have moved on past point-blank asking him if he's on some kind of drug. "Why not," he says. "Where do you feel like doing it?"

God, Danny wants to go back to Colleen's. It's too dangerous, though, so he says, "That fire escape over there should do the trick." He glances at it, then huffs out a breath. "Could you give me a boost?"

37. the city's a blaze, the town's on fire

Summary for the Chapter:

Matt's not the first to make it into Foggy's apartment, is the thing. If he had been, things would've turned out differently, he's sure, but the facts remain: Hargrove got there first.

Notes for the Chapter:

title from Deep Purple's "Burn".

also. this chapter was such a pain to write and I'm still not okay with it, but at this point I'm sick and tired of it, so.

you grew up.

"Welcome to Josie's," says Foggy, as he and Lucas step through the familiarly welcoming threshold into Josie's. "It's the best shithole in all of Hell's Kitchen."

Lucas looks around, and says, "I mean, I guess it's an improvement on the Chief's usual haunt, back in the day."

"I don't even want to know how you know that," says Foggy, "seeing as the Chief's usual haunt closed down before any of us were old enough to drink."

Lucas just shrugs noncommittally. "Definitely not," he says. "It was—d'you remember that time me and El and Mike got ambushed by that demodog near the bar? And I got too injured to do stitches, so Mike had to while El chased off the demodog?"

Foggy shudders at the thought, of Mike having to stitch someone up by himself. "Jesus," he says. "Yeah, I remember. Mike was a mess the day after—wait. *Wait.* You *didn't*."

"It steadied his hands a little more," says Lucas, and in the back of Foggy's mind Matt says, *he didn't want my hands shaking while I*

stitched him up.

“I thought he just got queasy ‘cause of stitching you up!” says Foggy, just as Josie leans on the counter and knocks on the wooden surface loudly enough to call his attention. When he turns, she’s squinting at him, as always.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Mister Corporate Big Shot,” she says. “Who’s your friend?”

Any other time, Foggy would parry it back. This time he feels eyes on him, even though logically he knows they’re all really looking at Lucas, and he tugs the collar of his shirt up.

“I got fired,” he says to Josie.

“Well, shit,” Josie drawls.

“I really did,” he says, and he sees the look of understanding and sympathy dawning on Josie’s face. “And this is Lucas—he’s an old friend, visiting from out of town.”

“Don’t think you’re getting free drinks now that you’re unemployed,” says Josie.

“I have twenty bucks,” says Foggy, more or less steering Lucas towards the counter.

“I’ll pay,” says Lucas, taking out his wallet. “Dustin’s telling me a story anyway.”

Josie raises her brow, her eyes sliding to Foggy’s. Right, shit. He hasn’t used his first name in *years*. “Dustin, huh,” she says. “Thought your name was Franklin.”

“Franklin’s my middle name, and only my dad calls me that,” says Foggy, taking his usual seat. “Lucas, this is Josie. We saved her bar once and now—”

“You still don’t get to drink for free,” says Josie, pouring out some beer for the both of them. “You seen your boy around anywhere?” she asks, softer now.

“His boy?” says Lucas, as Foggy goes still and looks down at his shot glass. “Who—Matt Murdock?”

“They used to come in together all the damn time,” says Josie to Lucas, leaning on the counter. “Got to the point where I figured they were attached to the hip or something.” She looks at Foggy, and says, quiet, “Still no?”

Foggy shakes his head, looks up to meet Josie’s eyes. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” he says, lying, knowing exactly where Matt is. “But no, Jos.”

Josie just nods, curtly. Foggy could swear he sees a brief flash of grief cross her face, but it’s there and gone before he can truly make sense of it. She turns away to attend to her other customers, and leaves him and Lucas alone.

Lucas doesn’t say anything, just takes a sip of his beer. Foggy drains half the contents of his glass as quickly as possible.

“You never drank that much in Hawkins,” says Lucas, eventually. “Not even that time when Max broke into her stepdad’s stash and snuck a couple bottles into the hospital.”

“New York,” is all Foggy says. He pauses, then adds, “*Hell’s Kitchen.*”

“So don’t stay here,” says Lucas. “Come back to Hawkins. Or go to California.” He huffs out a breath, fingers curling around his mug of beer. “Nothing’s really stopping you from leaving, once everything’s done.”

Foggy runs his teeth over his lower lip. He could leave after everything, he knows. Matt is dead, and he’s unemployed. There’s nothing really tethering him to New York anymore, technically, he could just let his lease lapse and take his stuff and just—go. Maybe spend his last twenty dollars on a ticket back to Indiana. What’s New York City to him now, after all, but the city Matt died for? What’s Hell’s Kitchen but the neighborhood Matt had loved more than him and Karen and the dreams they had together?

He could. He *could*.

"I can't," he says, and it's the truest thing he's said in years. "New York is—it's *home*. I don't wanna leave it."

He's got this feeling he couldn't, anyway, even if he wanted to. That's the thing about this city, about Hell's Kitchen. Despite everything, it still digs its claws into his bones, carves out a space in the hollow spaces of his chest to fill. He'd been a Hawkins boy once, maybe, but —Hawkins had never dug in this deep. Almost nothing else has.

Except, god fucking damn him and his stupid martyr ass, Matt fucking Murdock.

Or maybe not *except*.

Lucas glances up towards the ceiling with a sigh. "Dart all over again," he mutters.

"New York is a totally different thing from Dart," Foggy stresses. "Anyway, *you* could leave Hawkins and go with Max anywhere. No one's stopping you."

"I've got a *job*," says Lucas. "And it's my *home*." He pauses, then narrows his eyes at Foggy.

"Hell's Kitchen is my home, like Hawkin's yours," says Foggy, again. "If it wasn't, I'd have packed my shit up right after the Incident and transferred to, shit, a university in Indianapolis or something."

"I get it, I get it," Lucas huffs, taking another sip of his beer. It's still mostly full, compared to Foggy's half-empty mug. Maybe he's got a point—Foggy hadn't been much of a drinker, before he hit Columbia. Hadn't even been too much of a drinker beyond being social until Fisk happened, until Elena's death, until he peeled back the Devil of Hell's Kitchen's black mask to see his best friend's face underneath.

He sighs and takes a sip.

"You were going to talk about Midland Circle," says Lucas, quietly, and Foggy glances around the bar. There's not a lot of people in today, and no one close enough to overhear what he has to say. His eyes flick to the corners of the ceiling, out of habit. "What happened there?"

Foggy sighs, and lowers his voice. "First, you need to know," he says, "that whatever I say is completely, utterly the truth. Even the ridiculous parts. Especially the ridiculous parts. I *promise* I'm not making any of it up."

"Dustin, we've been fighting monsters from another dimension since we were *kids*," Lucas starts.

"Ninjas were involved," says Foggy, deciding to rip the band-aid off.

"You're fucking with me," says Lucas.

"*I wish*," says Foggy, with feeling. "That's barely even scratching the surface."

So he tells him—not *everything*. He leaves out Matt's real role in the whole mess, skirts around what a blind lawyer was doing beyond a few words that toe the line between lie and truth. It's too easy by now, to do that, too easy to look his oldest friend in the eye and say he's not sure what happened to Matt there, at Midland Circle, only that he'd gone to try and talk someone he loved down.

But he tells Lucas as much as he can of the truth: the Hand, their ideology, Midland Circle's collapse, and him and Karen waiting all the while in a police precinct for word of what was going on. Four going down, three coming out, and in the aftermath: Daredevil dead, Matt nowhere to be seen.

Lucas is staring at him, his jaw slack, after Foggy finishes the story. "Jesus, Dustin," he says. "I—*Jesus*."

"Yeah, I know," says Foggy. "Resurrection-crazy ninjas with a slice of domestic terrorism in the name of making sure the ninjas don't fucking *level the city*? Sounds like something Will would make up for an indie comics publisher."

"If it was something Will made up he'd have added a government conspiracy," says Lucas. "God, Dustin. All of that? And you didn't say anything to *us*?"

Us. The Party.

The voice of a young girl echoes in his head, from years ago: *friends don't lie*.

Foggy swirls the remains of his drink around his mug. He could say it hadn't been his story to tell. He could say he'd been scared shitless of the Hand, and had kept it to keep them safe. He could say he meant to, one day, he was just figuring out how best to say it.

Instead he says, "I didn't want you guys to worry. I figured, hell, we've all seen enough shit. I could handle it."

"Uh-huh," says Lucas, distinctly unimpressed. "Yeah, 'cause you're handling it *so well* right now."

"I was handling it until the Upside Down showed up again," says Foggy, pouring himself another drink, letting his bitterness and frustration seep into his voice. "Now I'm fired, suspended, and being investigated for tax fraud and shit. And I have to show up, in a courtroom, in a matter of *days*, and Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy are *still missing*. What a fucking week."

"Makes the day-drinking thing more understandable, though," says Lucas. "Ninjas, your partner going missing, Steve and Nancy and Jonathan going missing, and now the Upside Down? Fuck."

"Yeah," Foggy agrees, "fuck." He raises his mug to his lips once more, but pauses and glances at Lucas.

"What I don't get," says Lucas, "is—what about Murdock? He went with Cage and Jones, didn't he?"

"He did," says Foggy.

"So," says Lucas, "*why*? You said he wanted to come along, but he's blind." He takes a sip of his beer, and says, "Why would Cage and Jones agree to let him come along, or kidnap him, or whatever? They would've needed him later just in case."

"Matt's stubborn as hell," says Foggy, looking down at his drink. "Or was, I guess."

"Up against Mr. Bulletproof and the nineties version of Supergirl?"

says Lucas, raising an eyebrow. "What's bothering me about this whole story is: no one stopped the blind guy from coming with them. Not even Daredevil."

Oh, hell. Foggy's pretty sure he knows where this is going, and it ends in *Matt's Daredevil and you're a goddamn terrible liar*. He takes a longer sip of his drink, and meets Lucas' gaze once more.

"Maybe," he ventures, "he knew Matt wasn't going to back down, come hell or high water." God knows Foggy's tried, so many times. Matt's the most stubborn person he's ever met. *Was*. "Not when someone he loved was down there too," he continues, the old jealousy bubbling in his chest and seeping into his voice despite his best efforts.

And he can't even blame it all on Elektra, wherever she is. If she's even still—sort of alive, he supposes. If she hasn't gone and died again. He wonders if she made it out of Midland Circle, but—he can't see that happening, not if Matt died down there.

He could've made it out, Karen had said.

But six months on, and Foggy's sure he didn't.

Lucas doesn't say anything for a long moment. Then he reaches a hand out, and rests it on Foggy's hand, the weight and warmth of it reassuring. *You don't need to get through this alone*, he doesn't say, but Foggy can feel it anyway, in the warmth of his hands, fingers calloused from years of wielding weapons.

It's been a while since Foggy had to wield something harsher than a baseball bat, than his words. He'd thought maybe—

But *maybes* don't always pan out.

"So Daredevil—" starts Lucas.

Foggy's hand slips out. "Whatever you're going to ask me," he says, "if it's what I think it is—Lucas, some things I can't answer."

"Because we can't handle it?" Lucas asks, his tone flat. There's a hurt in his eyes, though, in the way his lips press together into a thin,

tight line. It hurts to see, and it hurts Foggy even more to know he's the reason for that. He wouldn't have been, years ago.

"Because I promised," says Foggy, and it's not a lie, he realizes, suddenly. From the moment he lied to Karen he'd thrown his lot in with Matt, for good or ill. Better or worse. *No secrets*. (Though: look how well they've stuck to *that* part.) "I *promised*, Lucas. That's why I can't say."

Lucas props up his chin with his hand, and says, "You remember Dart, right?"

"Oh, no," says Foggy, "oh, *no*, we aren't going to get into that right now, this isn't *anything* like Dart."

"I'm just saying!" says Lucas, jabbing Foggy in the chest with his finger. "You had a creepy little bond with that thing, and it bit you right on the ass! Metaphorically," he adds, as an afterthought, as Foggy smacks his hand away. "Ow—I'm worried, all right, maybe this is the same thing. Being friends with Daredevil's coming back to bite you on the ass."

"How would you know if I was friends with *Daredevil*?" Foggy asks, incredulous. Jesus, has he been that transparent all this time? Or is it just Lucas? After all, Lucas is one of his oldest, closest friends. He wishes he didn't have to lie to him, all the more. "I'm a lawyer, Lucas. That's—That's sort of an insurmountable barrier to befriending a vigilante."

"And yet Mike says you freaked out when you heard there was a Daredevil copycat," says Lucas. "And yet you told us you got fired because you were too close to a violent vigilante—*not* the Punisher. Hogarth hired you after that, right? Doesn't make sense for her to fire you for being associated with him afterwards, but if it was someone else—"

"Maybe I just freaked out because I don't want more copycats running around my neighborhood, did you think of that?" Foggy says, a little harsher than he meant it to be. On anyone else the bite to his voice would've scared them off, but this is Lucas. He just looks Foggy dead in the eye, not backing down.

“Dustin,” says Lucas, “was that *really* it? Because we’ve known you for years, and I’m pretty sure Mike can tell the difference between the two scenarios.”

“I’ve been in New York for years,” says Foggy. “I’m not—maybe I’m not the *same*, Lucas.”

“You’re right,” says Lucas, after a moment, and sorrow threads into his voice, stabs through Foggy’s gut like a rusty knife. “What was I thinking, right? You grew up, you drifted away, you’re keeping secrets—maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t know you anymore.”

He moves to stand, his chair scraping back as he pulls out his wallet.

Then Josie says, “What the hell?”

Foggy blinks, then turns away from Lucas to look at the TV, the news airing. He hears Lucas’ chair scrape against the floor again, but it goes distant and faint once he sees the headline on the screen: APARTMENT BUILDING BOMBED IN HELL’S KITCHEN.

And just above it, there’s a video: a building with smoke pouring out of its windows. Out of one window, in particular.

That’s his building on the news.

That’s his building burning.

“Oh, god,” breathes Foggy. “Oh, god, I have to go.”

“I’m coming with you,” says Lucas, tossing down a hundred-dollar bill onto the counter.

For once, Foggy doesn’t try to argue it, but instead grabs Lucas and leads the way.

--

fifteen minutes ago.

Matt’s not the first to make it into Foggy’s apartment, is the thing. If he had been, things would’ve turned out differently, he’s sure, but the

facts remain: Hargrove got there first.

Matt's fault. He'll do better next time.

If there is a next time, he thinks, in that small part of his head that's not concentrated on the fight in front of him: Hargrove brought a *knife*, as well as a ticking time bomb that's already been set.

Matt knows the type of bomb, and he knows too damn well: *he can't defuse it*. Someone sighted would be able to cut a wire there, perhaps, but unfortunately for Matt people who make bombs generally don't take blind people trying to defuse them into account.

Then Hargrove slams him up against the wall. "Why the *hell* do you care about this guy, anyway?" he snarls. He smells like alcohol and—disinfectant? This isn't his first fight today.

Matt answers by bringing his knee up. Hargrove squeals and lets go of him, doubling over. Matt brings his fists down on his head, starts punching, *keeps* punching until Hargrove's unconscious. He's tempted, he's *so tempted* to keep going.

But the time bomb keeps ticking. Matt pushes himself up and tries to pull it off from the wall it's been stuck to, but the damn thing doesn't budge.

Okay. Okay.

Twenty-four heartbeats downstairs, three (four?) directly below. Matt rushes out of Foggy's apartment and pulls the fire alarm, the *tick-tick-tick* of the time bomb echoing in his head.

Then the alarm screams out, and he has to clap his hands over his hears. That's precious seconds gone, then he feels a hand on his shoulder.

"—okay there, Mr. Devil?" a young boy's voice asks, and Matt's world on fire resolves into something more concrete again: a kid in front of him, the cool concrete wall against his back, the kid's tiny hand on his shoulder. He recognizes his voice, suddenly: the boy the Russians kidnapped, once upon a time. "Mr. Devil?"

“You need to get *out of here*,” says Matt. “There’s a bomb, *you have to go*.”

“A—A *bomb*?”

“Go,” Matt urges him. “Get your father, tell everyone, there’s a bomb in the building and they need to go *now*.”

“Okay, okay!” says the kid. He scurries off, just as Matt gets to his feet. A moment later, he hears the sounds of people stirring, the noise spreading: *there’s a fire? there’s a bomb? quick, everyone out, everyone move—*

He staggers back to Foggy’s apartment to grab Hargrove and go.

Hargrove’s not there.

Fuck.

He can’t waste any more time looking for Hargrove. He backs up, then jumps out of Foggy’s window—

And behind him, the apartment *explodes*.

38. so sad to see you fade away

Summary for the Chapter:

“Uh, your apartment exploded, Foggy-bear,” says Marci, right behind Karen. “What do you think we did, compared manicures? We ran here—and I broke a Louboutin on the way here, so don’t say I don’t love you.”

“I’m not paying,” says Foggy, and it sounds like he’s just operating on reflex and instinct, at this point.

“No one is paying for anything,” Karen quickly says, before Marci can reply. “Foggy, what—what happened?”

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from the Blow Monkeys' "Digging Your Scene".
(*Blow Monkeys*, hah.)

had a plan.

“Say what now,” says Mike, stunned.

Malcolm sighs. “We know where Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy are,” he says, in his kindest, most client-friendly voice. It’s much friendlier than Jessica can bring herself to give on her best days, and certainly a great deal warmer than her clipped announcement when they came in that *we know where your missing reporter, photographer, and stay-at-home husband are.*

“Where?” says Will, at about the same time Mike nearly stands up from the sofa, held back only by Jane’s fingers catching on his sleeve. “Who—How did you know—”

“She beat up Billy,” says Max, pointing a bottle of beer at Jessica. They’re all spread out in the Wheeler-Harrington-Byers apartment, with Colleen bent over the coffee table with files and fake IDs and god knows what the hell else, Max in the apartment’s kitchen, Malcolm standing in front the sofa, Jane and Will and Mike on the

sofa, and Jessica getting Claire's undivided attention on her hand from her cushion on the floor. "It was awesome."

"She knocked his head into the top of his doorframe and threatened him," says Malcolm.

"Okay, that's awesome, too," says Mike. "But also, okay, where are my sister and her husbands? And do we know just *how* involved Billy Hargrove is? Max?"

"And how the hell did you fuck up your hand this much?" says Claire, aggrieved. "Damn it, Jess."

"I punched a wall," says Jessica.

"I don't fucking know," says Max, shaking her head, her smile vanishing. She'd made a beeline for the fridge and cracked open a bottle of beer, and now she's been nursing that bottle a while. Where the hell, Jessica wonders, are Lucas Sinclair and Foggy Nelson? By all rights, they should be here by now. "But they're in the lab near Midland Circle."

"*Fuck*," says Colleen.

"*Shit*," says Claire. "Jess, hold still."

"I have a *healing factor*," Jessica says, peeved.

"That's why I'm not putting stitches through your hand right now," says Claire. "Be glad. I said *hold still*." To Malcolm she says, "You did a good job!"

"Thanks," says Malcolm. "You guys had a plan, right?"

"We *have* a plan and it hasn't changed," says Claire, "we get in, we get the information we need to actually put together a workable strategy beyond *punch bad guys*, we get out of there."

"Okay, I still say your plan is stupid and needs work," says Jessica, gesturing at Colleen with her less injured hand, "because you're a nurse and *you're* a sword-crazy kung-fu teacher, and we're talking about going up against a crime lord who *kidnaps people*."

“Don’t forget the mad scientist,” Jane says. “Who’s also kidnapped our *family*.”

“Oh, yeah, I completely forgot,” says Jessica, her tone curt, “about a significant part of the reason why Lucas, Danny, and I got dragged into this mess in the first place.”

The room goes almost completely silent, Jane’s face turning to a color almost like ash. Claire’s steady hands freeze, and Jessica narrows her eyes, and very carefully extricates her hand from Claire’s. The room falling silent is never a good sign, and she catches Malcolm’s confused look, sees the realization dawning on Max’s.

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Jessica says. “Something with Luke and Danny involved.”

Colleen hunches in on herself, drawing her jacket tighter around her body.

“Wing—”

“We saw them,” says Jane.

Jessica says, “What? You—*what*?”

“Wait,” says Max, sounding a little offended, “did you guys try to rescue them without *us*?”

“We couldn’t wait!” says Mike. “We knew where they were, we had a plan—”

“And I’m gonna guess it didn’t work out the way you thought it would,” says Jessica, her words sharp as knives, “because Luke and Danny *aren’t here*.” She stands up, cocks her head towards the bedroom, and adds with a bitterly sarcastic edge, “Or are they just hiding out in the bedroom?”

Guilt looks, all around, and Jane’s furtive eyes the guiltiest of all.

“What,” says Jessica, deadly calm, “*happened*?”

For a few seconds, for an eternity, the room is so silent that Jessica’s

pretty sure she could hear a pin drop.

“You’re right,” says Colleen, at last, “we almost got them out.”

“What do you mean,” says Jessica, “*almost?*”

Claire lets out a breath. “We managed to open a gate just enough to see them with Jane’s help,” she explains, in a flat voice that means she’s trying to keep herself together. “But somehow that called a monster to them, and we had to cut the connection off and shut the gateway before we could get through to them.”

Shut the gateway—shut off their way *home*.

“I had to shut the gate,” says Jane, and Jessica’s hands clench into fists. “They didn’t want to, *no one* wanted to, but it was either that or risk the monster coming through.”

“So you *left* them to deal with it themselves?” says Jessica, her words a snarl. “Great fucking job there—”

“I said no one wanted to leave them!” snaps Jane, straightening up. “But we were in a crowded restaurant, and the longer the gate stayed open the more chance there was the monster could come through and kill *everyone*. You saw what a juvenile demogorgon could do to a person. You saw the fully-grown version. How much of a chance could anyone besides them have stood?”

“And they’ve spent *how* long in this hellhole again?” Jessica replies, her tone sharp as she takes a step closer to Jane.

“She did *everything she could*—” snaps Mike, at the same time Claire says, “Jess, for god’s sake, she’s done *more than enough*—”

“We are trying to *get them out*,” says Colleen, stepping in between the two of them. Jessica looks around, sees that Will’s grabbed hold of Mike’s arm, that the guy is already half-out of the couch, as if ready to leap to his wife’s defense. Even Claire’s tensed up. Jesus. “We’re not trying to get the city even more infested with those things—”

“Demodogs,” Jane supplies. “Dustin called them demodogs.”

“*Demodogs*,” Colleen continues, “than it already is. You saw what one of them did to one person! What more do you think they could do, if more of them came through?”

And goddammit, they’ve got a point.

“Speaking of that,” says Malcolm, having stepped closer to Jessica and put himself in between her and Mike, as if he could stand a chance against the guy, “we—do have an idea, right? About what we’re going to do with Nougat? We just know he showed up on Trish’s doorstep, but nothing else.”

“Not exactly,” Max says as she steps closer to Jane, looking to Jessica, “we’ve got the note. A picture of it, actually.”

Jessica steps back from Jane, after a moment. She pulls her phone out of her jacket, pulls up the picture she took of the note, and says, “Any of you recognize the handwriting?”

“Uh, no,” says Jane.

“No,” says Colleen, “no, doesn’t ring a bell—then again, it’s not like I get a chance to look at people’s handwriting a lot.”

Claire squints at it, and says, “Yeah, neither do I. Doesn’t really look familiar to me.”

“It does to me,” says Mike, suddenly. “It’s from Nancy’s notes.”

“You think it’s Trainer?” says Will, frowning.

“It’s either Trainer,” says Mike, “or someone else, I’m not *sure*.”

“Okay, since you’re such an expert on handwriting,” says Jessica, her tone sharper than it probably should be, but whatever, she’s tired and she’s angry and *they left Luke and Danny behind*, “which one do you think it is, Wheeler?”

“If I had to guess?” says Mike, meeting her steely gaze head-on. “I’d say Trainer.”

waking up to ash and dust.

Karen's at the hospital when Foggy's building explodes.

She's *out* of the hospital once the news hits, though, Marci hot on her heels, Midland Circle's collapse replaying in her head. Maybe she wasn't there, but she's seen the footage, and for one terrible moment she expects the place to be nothing more than ash and rubble.

It's a shell of itself when she gets there, surrounded by firefighters and policemen and stunned residents. Karen's heart almost stops.

Then someone calls: "Karen!"

Karen whips around, and Foggy's practically colliding into her. "Foggy," says Karen, her relief crashing over her as she clings on to him. He's her best friend. He's one of the few people, period, that she has left. She can't *lose him*, she just can't, not the way she lost Matt. "Oh, god, Foggy—"

"I'm okay," says Foggy, but he sounds wrecked. Looks wrecked, too, stunned and shaken like his whole world's just been yanked out from under his feet. Well, his building just fucking exploded. Anyone would be freaking out, Karen can't blame Foggy for being so shaken up. "I'm okay, I'm okay. Lucas is doing nurse-y stuff, helping with the patients, what're you—what're you and Marci doing out here?"

"Uh, your apartment exploded, Foggy-bear," says Marci, right behind Karen. "What do you think we did, compared manicures? We *ran* here—and I broke a Louboutin on the way here, so don't say I don't love you."

"I'm not paying," says Foggy, and it sounds like he's just operating on reflex and instinct, at this point.

"No one is paying for anything," Karen quickly says, before Marci can reply. "Foggy, what—what happened?"

"I don't know," says Foggy, running a hand through his hair. "Lucas and I were at Josie's, we were nowhere near my place. Maybe a—a gas main exploded, or something." He doesn't sound convinced.

Neither's Karen. She's seen this happen before, and a lesson she's learned: it's never just gas. "This isn't gas," she says, firmly. "Someone targeted your building. This was deliberate."

Foggy says, quiet, "Shit. Will's contact."

Karen stares at him. "Who?" she says.

"Some asshole masquerading as Daredevil," says Foggy. "The same one I told you about. Will said he'd taken an interest in me—Jesus Christ, whoever he was, he must've thought—" He pales, eyes growing wide with terror, and Karen can already picture the scenario in her head: if Foggy had come back earlier—

Well, she's glad he didn't.

"How the hell," says Marci, breaking into the rapid downward spiral Karen's thoughts are taking, "did *you* get the attention of some Daredevil copycat?"

"I don't know," says Foggy, helplessly. "I don't even know why *anyone* would look at Daredevil and say, *yeah, that's the guy I want to rip off.*"

"Your friend Will," says Karen, "can I talk to him? You said this Daredevil copycat was his contact, maybe he has an idea who it is."

"Yeah, I've got his number right here," says Foggy, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "Shit, my apartment—oh, *no.*"

Karen plucks his phone from his suddenly nerveless fingers, sees the look of horror dawning on his face. "What is it?" she asks. "Foggy?"

"I need to—I have to go," says Foggy, "maybe they salvaged something, maybe they *need* more people to help in salvaging—" He's backing away as he speaks, then he spins around. "I have to go!" he shouts back over his shoulder, and disappears into the crowd once more.

Karen stares after him. "Oh, shit," she says, recognizing the look on his face. It's the same look as the one she saw when he was staring at the computer screen, Reyes' taunts in their ears. It's the same look as

the one she saw just before he raced out of the room and into the night, because Daredevil had been spotted on the scene.

Because *Matt* had been there, she knows now, and had been in danger.

In retrospect, the evidence was staring her right in the face then, when Foggy rushed out of the room, when Foggy tried to clamber off the hospital bed to go looking for his blind best friend in the middle of a war zone. She didn't, still *doesn't* know anyone else Foggy would risk his life for.

"He's gonna do something incredibly stupid, isn't he," says Marci. Karen turns to look at her, sees her shaking her perfectly-permed head and putting her hands on her hips. She looks a little odd, with one of her heels broken off, almost lopsided and less put together than what Karen's used to seeing out of her. It makes her seem more—real, more of a person than a shark. "You want to go race after him or should I?"

"I'm going," says Karen, pushing Foggy's phone into Marci's manicured fingers. "You—can you talk to Foggy's friend Will? I have to go after Foggy before he does something he regrets."

"You and dear Foggy-bear owe me the fanciest dinner this shitty little dump can possibly puke up," says Marci, but she takes the phone and taps in Foggy's passcode anyway. "Oh, and a couple of new pumps, too."

"Don't push it," Karen says, before she turns to take off after Foggy.

39. while our beds are burning

Summary for the Chapter:

“Who’d Foggy piss off this badly, anyway?” says Malcolm, heading into the kitchen to grab sandwiches, water, anything that could help. “Guy’s like a teddy bear.”

“He’s a teddy bear who also works as a lawyer with a halfway-decent moral compass,” says Jessica. “Who hasn’t he pissed off?”

Notes for the Chapter:

title from Midnight Oil's "Beds Are Burning".

golden girl and zombie boy.

Marci watches Karen go, fading into the crowd after Foggy, then sighs. This week has just been one long shitshow for her ex, honestly, and she can kind of understand why Foggy’s been reluctant to leave her out of it now, considering his apartment just got *blown the hell up*.

Seriously, now she’s a little bit glad *she* didn’t draw the attention of whoever it is that’s so laser-focused on taking Foggy down a few notches. She likes her job too much.

She pulls up Foggy’s contacts list. Nothing out of the ordinary here, and she scrolls absently down to check if he still has her name: there’s Hogarth, there’s Karen Page, and ah, there she is—

Wait a moment.

She scrolls back up, and frowns. Matt Murdock’s name is still programmed into the list. It’s nothing *weird*, she supposes, Foggy’s always had a weird little Thing with his best friend that she’s never cared much about. It shouldn’t be such a surprise that even when the guy’s missing, Foggy’s still got him on his phone. God, he probably texts him every night hoping for some kind of sign, or something.

...god-fucking-dammit. Her lips press together into a thin line. They might've been broken up for a while now, but the knowledge still stings, the shadow of Matt fucking Murdock still *hurts*.

She sighs. She scrolls back up and taps Will Byers' name on the list, the first Will there. The phone rings and rings, and Marci almost shifts her weight onto her leg with the broken shoe out of impatience.

She does not topple off-balance, but she does shift her weight back onto her leg with the non-broken heel. Jesus. Foggy-bear owes her a nice new pair of heels.

Although considering the state of his finances, she's pretty sure she won't be getting them out of him for a while yet.

"*Hey, Dustin,*" says Byers, warmly, if a little bit strained.

Marci says, "Wait, who?"

"*Who's this?*" says Byers, suddenly alert. "*Where's Dustin?*"

Dustin? Wait—*Foggy*. It's been so long since she's heard anyone refer to her ex as anything other than *Foggy* or *Franklin* or *Mr. Nelson* that she'd honestly forgotten Franklin was his middle name. "I'm his lawyer," she says, and it's not totally a lie, she's a lawyer who hasn't gotten her license suspended as of yet, "Marci Stahl. Is this Will Byers?"

"You're *Marci Stahl? Dustin's ex, Marci Stahl?*" says Byers. Marci shifts her weight onto her other leg, and remembers too late: the heel's broken. She bites back a curse. "*He talked about you!*"

"Only good things, I'm sure," says Marci.

Byers just laughs, nervously, on the other end of the line. Marci hears some muffled noises in the background, someone saying Foggy's name. A woman, she thinks, but she can't quite tell. "*Uh, yeah,*" says Byers, distractedly. "*This is a bad time, Dustin's not here.*"

"Oh, I know," says Marci. "I'm here at his building—it just got blown up." She sighs. "What do you know about this Daredevil copycat that's apparently obsessed with Foggy?"

"Wait, hold on," says Byers, alarmed, "*what do you mean, Dustin's building just got blown up?*"

--

how not to piss someone off.

"Oh," says Mike, faintly, "*shit.*"

"Oh," says Jessica, loudly, "*fuck.*"

"Foggy's building *blew up?*" says Claire. She's already in motion, stuffing essentials for first aid into her bag, cursing quietly to herself. She's still a licensed nurse, even if she's not currently working at any hospitals, she can imagine the workload already. If she can help, somehow—

God, Foggy. Foggy. Poor guy. This week has been especially horrible to him, and she's got a boyfriend currently missing in an alternate dimension full of evil man-eating monsters.

"I'm coming with you," says Colleen, scrambling to her feet, the fake IDs and papers forgotten. "I have a couple of students who live there, I have to check on them."

"Yeah, me too," says Malcolm, after he glances briefly to Jessica, "I know a couple people nearby in and around the building, I need to see if they're okay too."

"Hey, we're coming too, it's *Dustin*," says Max, already grabbing her keys off the kitchen counter, "I can cram you guys into my car, it's faster than walking or the subway—"

"I can move some of the rubble out of the way," says Jane, taking her jacket off the back of the couch. "*Discreetly*, I've done it a couple times before."

"Jonathan keeps a really thorough first-aid kit around here somewhere," says Will, already rummaging around under the couch. Mike clambers off to help, and Jessica steps closer and lifts the entire couch off the ground with ease.

“Don’t thank me,” Jessica says, sourly. “Oh, look, no kit.”

“It’s in the bathroom,” says Jane, and she ducks into the bathroom.

“Who’d Foggy piss off this badly, anyway?” says Malcolm, heading into the kitchen to grab sandwiches, water, anything that could help. “Guy’s like a teddy bear.”

“He’s a teddy bear who also works as a lawyer with a halfway-decent moral compass,” says Jessica. “Who *hasn’t* he pissed off?”

Claire crams the last of her medical supplies into her bag, just as Jane comes out with a sizable medical kit. *Sizable*, because it’s much bigger at a glance than a couple civilians should be carrying, even accident-prone civilians. Again, Claire remembers the story, the psychic children, the monsters emerging from another dimension.

Foggy hadn’t had a medical kit like that, when he’d called her in that first time asking for help with Matt. But he’d known how to stitch someone up, how to hold someone down and soothe them, how to do minor patch-ups so she could concentrate on the major wounds. He’d said it had been a first-aid course, at the time, and she hadn’t called him on that.

Well, she supposes he hadn’t been lying. Nothing’s a better crash course in first aid than having to patch up someone after they’ve been nearly eaten by a monster.

She closes up her bag. “We’re all going?” she asks.

“Uh, *yeah*,” says Mike, eyeing Claire like he can’t believe she just asked him something so obvious, “it’s *Dustin*. He needs us. And he’d do the same for any of us, if we were in trouble.”

And the hell of it is, he’s right.

She sighs. “Well, the more of us there, the better to help out with anything the rescuers might need,” she reasons.

“I’m worried about Foggy,” says Malcolm. “He’s not going to be taking this well.”

"His building just *blew up* with all his shit in it," says Mike, "you think anyone's going to take that well? And with the week he's had?"

And goddammit, Mike has a point.

Which means they need to get there, *now*.

--

shouldn't have signed it.

"—let me in, please, you have to let me in, that's my apartment, that's my *building*, I left something behind—"

"Foggy!" calls Karen, pushing through the crowd that's amassed near the building, with some harried police officers trying their hardest to push them all back. Foggy's at the edge, trying to reason with an officer. Good. She's glad, she'd been *worried* he'd just run into the building. "Foggy, thank god—what are you doing?"

"I left something in my apartment," says Foggy. "The—The *files*—"

"I have copies at mine," says Karen. "They might not be the most up-to-date, but they're there."

"Pictures—"

"I've got a few at home," says Karen. "The St. Paddy's Day one, I've still got that. And your other friends, they might have all those other pictures." Her hand slips into the crook of his elbow, fingers curling around his arm to keep him from charging in. She can't let him head into that building, not by himself. She can't—She can't lose another friend.

"My clothes—"

"I've got shirts and pants that can fit you," says Karen, electing to ignore the searching look Foggy gives her. No need for him to know Frank drops by, sometimes, bleeding and carrying information. "Foggy. Foggy. You can't go in there."

"I left the sign in there," says Foggy, miserably, and that—that is a

punch to the gut that Karen hadn't expected. "The stupid—I *left it inside*, it's the only, it's all I've got of—"

He chokes, and spins back on his heel to look at the apartment building.

They'd been so proud of that sign, Karen remembers. Matt had run his fingers over it until the edges of the letters were wearing smooth. *It looks like a million bucks*, Foggy had said, proud and happy, and although they only spent a couple hundred bucks on it Karen had felt the same.

And the firm is gone, and Matt is gone, and now the sign is gone and it's not fucking *fair*.

"I'm sorry," says Karen, and it's all she can give, all she can do. This week cannot possibly get any worse than this. "Foggy, I'm so sorry."

"I didn't even do anything," says Foggy. "I didn't—what did I do?"

"We'll find them," Karen says, taking hold of his shoulder. "We'll find the fucker responsible for this, and by god, Foggy, we will make them pay for what they did to you and to everyone in your building—"

Foggy winces, and says, "Karen, my *shoulder*."

"It's not bothering you, is it?" says Karen, concerned, taking her hand off his shoulder. She hadn't realized—dammit.

"It's not," Foggy confirms, just as heels click on the pavement behind them. Or a heel clicks on the pavement behind them.

"Oh, good!" says Marci. "You didn't do anything stupid like charge into a burning building by yourself. Thank fucking god." She holds up Foggy's phone and says, "You've got more friends on the way. Catch."

Karen grabs the phone out of the air before Foggy can, and hands it over to him. "He did try," she says.

"I was stopped by police," says Foggy, stuffing his phone into his pocket. "And I still have to get inside, there's something I need to

pick up in there.” He turns to the police officer and says, worriedly, “There’s—There’s a sign I have to get, it’s important—”

“What’s it look like, this sign?” says the officer.

“Pretty simple,” says Foggy. “It’s this little plaque, made of brass, says, *Nelson & Murdock, Attorneys-at-Law*.”

Karen glances up at the building, now merely smoldering instead of actively burning. Her eyes catch on a flash of black in the distance, and she rubs at her eyes, blinks once, twice.

Matt?

One of the firefighters coming out from inside jogs up to the officer, then looks Foggy up and down. “Here, aren’tcha the guy from the Punisher case?” the firefighter says, taking her mask off and hoisting up a canvas bag. “Murdock?”

“Obviously not,” says Marci, “considering he’s been missing a while.”

“Nelson,” says Foggy, interjecting. “Why?”

“Found something of yours,” says the firefighter, handing the canvas bag over to Foggy. “Just sitting there in the rubble, first thing anyone could see, only the tiniest bit scorched. Wasn’t even *hot*. Kinda weird, yeah?” She shrugs, and says, “I’d be careful, still.”

“Are we giving out evidence now ‘cause we feel sorry for some poor bastard?” huffs the officer.

“Well, it looked like it was his!” the firefighter retorts.

The officer shakes his head and says to Foggy, “Firefighters, Christ. Give that to me, all right? Don’t even think about touching it, our perp’s prints might still be on it.”

Foggy doesn’t answer. He just opens the canvas bag and looks down into it, although Karen notes that he doesn’t touch whatever’s inside.

She leans over his shoulder, just enough to catch a glimpse of the plaque—somehow intact. Weird. The only way the sign would’ve

been able to escape an explosion unscathed would've been if someone had thought to...take it with them...

"Oh," says Foggy, like everything's clicking into place.

"Someone's taunting you," says Karen. It makes sense now. It all makes *sense*.

"Someone who *really* hates you," says Marci.

"I think I know who," says Foggy. "And I think I know exactly what's going on here."